VIDEOGAME CULTURE

DECEMBER 2004 £

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Touch!

Hands on with the finished NDS hardware
Plus: Reggie on taking names and kicking ass



ACTIVISION'S ANNIVERSARY
FROM PITFALL TO DOOM 3: THE WORLD'S OLDEST THIRDPARTY PUBLISHER HITS 25

MAJORA'S MASK
A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE DARK ART OF NINTENDO'S FORGOTTEN MASTERPIECE

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DOMINIK DIAMON
KEEPING THE GAMESMASTER SPIR ALIVE WITH WHEN GAMES ATTAC

PREVIEWED GRAN TURISMO 4 **PRINCE OF PERSIA 2** THE BARD'S TALE **DEVIL MAY CRY 3** RESIDENT EVIL 4 **SHINING TEAR**
REVIEWED HALF-LIFE 2 **ROME: TOTAL WAR** FINAL FANTASY XI **SLY 2** SEGA SUPERSTARS **TRIBES: VENGEANCE** THUG





Welcome to a new issue of **Edge**, in which you will notice a number of changes. First, there's the format of the magazine itself. We haven't reinvented the thing (which will be a relief to all those of you who've written in telling us not to do that – as if we would), but, as we prepare to accept the change that comes with another new generation of gaming hardware, we thought we'd get ourselves into better shape to do it justice. And that's meant a tweak here, a tuck there, and a comic strip ostensibly about a pudgy little alien slapped on to the end of the letters pages.

Another change this month concerns Nintendo. It seems like only yesterday that speculation over the company's forthcoming DS handheld system concerned not how it might actually revolutionise gaming, but just how heavy a white elephant it would turn out to be. Confidence in the sleeping Kyoto giant had long been ebbing away, even among those who've slavishly followed its output since the early '80s (and it comes to something when you can't even depend on Nintendo diehards to rally in the face of adversity), but in Japan recently we have seen a company brimming with potential once more. The attraction of the DS hardware is such that everyone wants to have a piece of it, from Namco to Sega to EA to every ambitious outfit in between, and once you've spent some time with the finished hardware it's easy to see why. This month's hands-on report (see page 74) assesses the console's suite of deliciously inventive features and rounds-up the key DS software currently in development around the world, while our new Start section kicks off with a report from the machine's triumphant showing in Tokyo (see page 8).

Now, if you're wondering where our old pal Toshihiro Nagoshi has gone, fear not: despite his bomb scare last month (and the 'unusual' effects it had on AV Out), he's not finished yet, and he'll be back here soon with an exclusive diary chronicling the making of his new game at Sega (possibly under strict instructions to keep absolutely on-message at all times). RedEye? RedEye's on holiday. The Making Of...? It will return next month. That bit at the top right of the contents page no one ever bothered to read? Gone forever.

Read the magazine and let us know what you think – about Nintendo's DS, the new-look **Edge**, Nagoshi, whatever. We're always interested in what you have to say. That's one thing that hasn't changed.



EDGE

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Why are you looking at this? Go and read the interview with Reggie, or something. Honestly.





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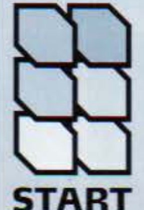


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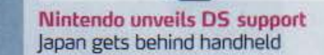
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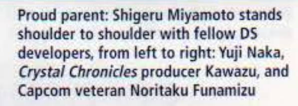



START
PLEASE TOUCH HERE!!
ピザ？
行く？
よし いこう！
NINTENDO DS

HARDWARE

Double trouble for Sony as DS shines

Nintendo's Japanese Gamers' Summit proves show of strength as handheld development attracts big names



Proud parent: Shigeru Miyamoto stands shoulder to shoulder with fellow DS developers, from left to right: Yuji Naka, *Crystal Chronicles* producer Kawazu, and Capcom veteran Noritaku Funamizu

It would have been enormously satisfying to see Nintendo and its DS console going up against Sony's PSP at this year's Tokyo Game Show, but that was not to be: as usual, the company elected to pass on the event in favour of its own activities. Since the DS is set to reach both eastern and western markets before the PSP, it was crucial for Nintendo to gain some kind of initiative, and that's precisely what happened with the DS-focused Gamers' Summit.

At the TFT convention centre in Odaiba (south of Tokyo) on October 7, Nintendo gathered Japan's key media and an army of supportive retail partners to premiere the DS, shoehorning more than 900 people into a tiny announcement room. Company president Satoru Iwata was the first on stage to explain Nintendo's DS philosophy to the audience: not adding more power to portable gaming, but finding new ways to enjoy it. Nintendo, he claimed, wants to meet the increasing demand for easier interfaces, a demand recognised years ago by the Japanese arcade industry, which answered it successfully by launching intuitive touchscreens in place of the traditional joystick-and-button setup. Iwata also dropped some tantalising, if non-committal, hints about chairman Hiroshi Yamauchi's intention to create an animation division within Nintendo. Though no concrete details were provided about this extraordinary prospect, he did reveal one aspect of how the DS intends to bring animation closer to gaming. At the cinema release of the next Pokémon movie, audience members will be able to use their DSs to download new monsters into their games, wirelessly, as they appear on screen.

At the cinema release of the next Pokémon movie, audience members will be able to use their DSs to download new monsters into their games, wirelessly

Shigeru Miyamoto followed Iwata, with his team's *Nintendogs/Puppy Life* game, a kind of super-evolved Tamagochi, and showed how the stylus allows players to interact with and pet their dogs, and how they can issue voice commands to them through the microphone. The demonstration went off without a hitch – in contrast to the awkwardness during the PSP premiere when Ken Kutaragi had to put a brave face on a fatal bug during his demo of *Minna No Golf*. Miyamoto then called to the stage the DS's star developers, an impressive roll call that gave a clear indication of



Iwata's rousing speech (above) explained his vision for the DS, but Miyamoto (left) stole the show, participating in other developers' presentations, asking questions about how their games would take full advantage of the device

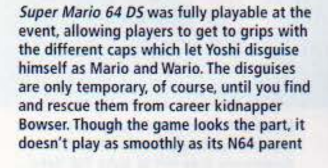








Mario Kart DS **looked fresher and sharper than it did in Los Angeles in May, with a selection of new tracks on display. Wireless multiplayer should guarantee the game's success, although it won't be ready for either the American or Japanese launch. It's not yet clear how much content will be sharable via wireless transfer on startup**

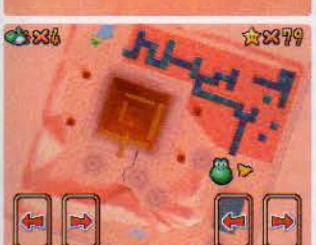


Super Mario 64 DS **was fully playable at the event, allowing players to get to grips with the different caps which let Yoshi disguise himself as Mario and Wario. The disguises are only temporary, of course, until you find and rescue them from career kidnapper Bowser. Though the game looks the part, it doesn't play as smoothly as its N64 parent**










just how strong support for the DS is among the Japanese development community. Cue Yuji Naka, Noritaku Funamizu (ex-Capcom, having worked on titles from *Street Fighter II* to *Monster Hunter*), Atsushi Inaba from Clover, the Takahashi brothers from Camelot, Tetsuya Mizuguchi and many more.

Then came the event's biggest surprise: the presence of Square Enix in the shape of Kawazu Akitoshi (producer of *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*). This represented a significant coup for Nintendo, which has only comparatively recently repaired its relationship with Square Enix since a falling-out during the PlayStation era. Despite being part-owned by Sony, Square Enix has yet to announce any PSP game development; in contrast, Kawazu revealed that the company has more than eight DS projects in production. While *Egg Monster Heroes* (a popular Japanese franchise) was already officially confirmed for the DS, Kawazu pleased the audience by simply showing the logo for *Final Fantasy III* for DS. He also announced *FF: Crystal Chronicles 2* as a DS title and discussed possibilities for using the device's wireless capabilities.

Other than the game announcements, what was perhaps most exciting about the Tokyo event was the range of possibilities discussed for the DS's technological future. Many ideas are still to be





Sturdy Japanese packaging differs from the western variety, although the actual gamecards (right) are obviously the same

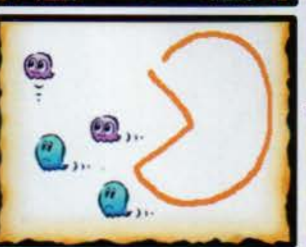


designed and tested, but the first to come out of prototyping should be wireless voice chat – and protocols are already being developed by Nintendo. This could be an important step for the machine, in light of Japan's typically rapid adoption of wireless. Nintendo may find the DS has a double life as a communications tool – ironic considering its positioning as a 'pure' gaming device rather than Sony's convergence-based vision of the future. Other companies are already developing internet browsing interfaces and protocols, and Bandai revealed that it already has the DS successfully interacting with PCs. Square Enix also intimated that it is experimenting with enabling the DS to interact with its own PlayOnline service (which supports *Final Fantasy XI*, among other titles). Even without PC connections, the DS's potential could be even greater than Nintendo is predicting – other developers confirmed they already have 32-machine networks operational, a massive step up from the conservative eight players Nintendo is currently willing to guarantee. However, these developments won't become available immediately. Several companies suggested that it wouldn't be until E3 next year that they could show the kind of advanced and ambitious games which could take full advantage of the DS's potential.

No matter how many questions the summit answered about the DS's hardware and its software line-up, the big question about its competitor remained: when will the PSP be released, and at what price? Sony's silence on the matter continues to make the promised 2004 release seem ever more unlikely, especially since it would add yet more competition to the big PS2 titles already fighting for commercial survival against the all-conquering *Dragon Quest VIII*. But the core factor in the PSP/DS face-off may be much simpler. To end the event, Nintendo gave every visitor a copy of the new tilt-sensitive *Mawaru: Made In Wario*. The result was a huge crowd of people standing outside the convention centre turning their GBAs – or themselves – around and around and around. Nintendo's magic appears to remain as strong as ever.

As well as hundreds of visitors and a few carefully deployed models (below), some famous faces also posed with a DS. Masahiro Sakurai (far left), the designer of *Meteos*, stands with his boss, Mizuguchi















Some Japanese DS titles are more likely to be granted western releases than others. From left to right: *Pac Pix*, demoed to a similarly muted response as it received at E3; *Egg Monster Heroes*, Square Enix's hugely popular RPG which lets you manoeuvre your army and command your monsters' attacks; *Zoo Keeper*, the DS incarnation of Robot's enduring puzzle game *Zooo*; *Yakuman* – not the only DS mah jong game, but the only one to feature familiar Nintendo faces



Photography: Hiroke Izumi

EVENT

PSP and Dragon Quest share honours in Japan

Sony's hardware and the long-awaited RPG from Square Enix prove big enough draws to see this year's Tokyo Game Show raise its game

What this year's Tokyo Game Show lacked in original software announcements – at least, those that hadn't been dutifully spoiled ahead of the show by their developers – it made up for with crowd-pulling spectacle in the form of PlayStation Portable (playable at last), the miniaturised PS2 redesign, a 24-minute teaser of Square Enix's Advent Children (though by now there could be few virgin scenes left in the film, so extensive has the frame-by-frame fan analysis been) and, arguably bigger than all the other attractions combined, a hands-on opportunity with the profoundly anticipated *Dragon Quest VIII*.

So successful was this line-up's appeal that organisers would report a 10,000-visitor increase over 2003's exhibition, forcing the doors to be opened half an hour early in a doomed attempt to minimise congestion – a move welcomed by those who had spent each night sleeping in front of the convention centre. It was like the good old days.

With Nintendo continuing to avoid the show, and declining to supply thirdparties with DS hardware in order to show their titles (leading the likes of Sega to cheekily show video footage with 'the DS' obscured), Sony had the floor to itself to demonstrate the PSP. Dozens of machines were on display at the SCEI booth, with even more on patrol around the show. The PSP pitch was by-the-



Microsoft threw a lot of money at making TGS an Xbox success, but, *Halo 2* aside, it struggled to draw attention away from the big hitters. *Forza Motorsport* at least looked typically polished



The Sega-Sammy stand was upfront with cars and models to promote *Sega Rally 2005*. Deeper in the booth, the Red-produced PS2 slasher *Shinsengumi Gunrouden* drew crowds

Though the PSP was well received, the questions that have nagged at it since its unveiling would remain unanswered. Sony would confirm neither a release date nor a price

numbers Sony: an attractive design, multimedia capabilities – including a well-timed climb-down on the mp3 stand-off, the PSP now accepting the format – and a show of support from right across the Japanese development scene.

Though the PSP was well received, the questions that have nagged at it since its unveiling would remain unanswered. Sony would confirm neither a release date nor a price for the machine, although a bullish Ken Kutaragi explained that as the PSP would be capable of more than Nintendo's upcoming portable, it should be expected to retail for a higher price. The battery-life issue was also skirted, though PSPs being paraded on the show floor were regularly whisked back inside SCEI's booth to avoid the batteries publicly running dry. If the battery's capacity was unclear, something more tangible was that the heat it generates is surprisingly high (a problem shared with Sony's latest generation of Vaio notebook PCs).

Structurally, the shoulder buttons appeared to have been improved since the version shown in August, but the D-pad remains uncomfortably reminiscent of the first-generation PS1 pad. The PSP's software line-up would also leave some observers wary, with few games other than the board or puzzle titles in a near-complete state – suggesting that the biggest-name titles may not make a 2004 Japanese launch. However, some were enormously promising, even at a prototype stage. *Rez* creator Tetsuya Mizuguchi's puzzle title *Lumines* seems set to be an iconic match for the handheld, with its strong visual and audio treatment. Similarly, Namco's new *Ridge Racer* generated considerable excitement purely on the strength of its handling and speed, even with only one circuit with no competing cars. On that form, despite providing the graphical high-water mark for the PSP's showing, it seems unlikely the game will launch with the machine, as the original so successfully did with the PlayStation. If the PSP is to have a launch title that will see the Japanese early-adopting market queuing in front of stores days before launch, it wasn't yet evident.

Elsewhere on the showfloor there were more visitors but fewer exhibitors, with several local



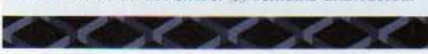
Those hoping to see more of *Ico 2* at TGS had to make do with looping video footage displayed in a faux rock-hewn Sony booth. As always, the 'no photos' sign did little to deflect attention

Newswire



Europe leaks Halo 2 to chipped community

Only a few days after the announcement that the game had gone gold, the first pirated *Halo 2* files became available on the internet. The source is seemingly a European disk replication plant, and the game code – playable only on chipped Xboxes – is PAL and in French. Microsoft has announced that it considers "downloading this code or making it available for others to download as theft," and is aggressively pursuing the source of the leak. The news must be particularly galling for Bungie, which has kept nearly all details of the singleplayer game secret in the hope of preserving the purity of the experience for the player. The developer has also reacted strongly, announcing via its forums that it would block the gamertags of users who helped spread the files: "We are NOT kidding around here. There will be no warning, no appeal, you'll just be gone." The game's UK release date of November 11 remains unaffected.









Sony promotional staff were out in force, offering a chance to play the (umbilically attached) PSP to a largely excitable crowd (but only for as long as the batteries lasted). However, the proliferation of puzzle and board games on playable test was a clear indicator that it's going to be some time before the hardware's potential will be given anything like a thorough workout









Among the surprises – not all necessarily pleasant ones, but there's development time aplenty yet – of TGS, from top: *Dragon Quest VIII*, the alpha version of *Sega Rally 2005*, Game Republic and Sony's colour-saturated *Genji*, and the 3D *Metal Slug*. All for PS2, as if there were any doubt this was a Sony show: only *Resident Evil 4* for GC and *Halo 2* on Xbox truly shone elsewhere

stalwarts such as From, Spike and Banpresto missing. This decreasing turnout of Japanese developers would be masked somewhat by a strong presence of Chinese and South Korean developers – generally from the burgeoning Asian PC MMORPG scene – able to field huge booths in other companies' absence.

Microsoft's stand, showing much the same western line-up as at E3 (supplemented by *Blinx 2* and *Phantom Dust*), was well-featured enough to indicate that the company remains committed to its dedicated fanbase, but seemed to be a focal point for wandering western journalists rather than showgoers. A notable exception was the *Halo 2* showing, which attracted a hearteningly sizeable crowd – eclipsed only by the one resulting from Tecmo's wheeling out of the *Dead Or Alive* roadshow for another year. Despite the scarcity of original titles, the quality of the franchise games on display was generally very high. Many of the playable demonstrations were identical to their E3 iterations – understandable, as TGS's consumer crowd would still be experiencing them for the first time, but perhaps also indicative of a change in market priorities among the larger developers.

Of those developers, Namco and Capcom both offered convincing presences on the strength of sequels for their popular franchises, and the Sega-Sammy combined showing was one of the event's largest booths, with pride of place given to the PS2's new *Sega Rally* title. Konami fielded one of its largest showings to date, albeit from a stand like some kind of giant supermarket, with games displayed in narrow, quickly overrun alleys.



Microsoft's *Halo 2* stand saw Master Chief on hand in life-size and Kubrick versions, with local enthusiasm proving much the same as with the game's previous appearances across the Pacific





Yuji Naka had much to be cheerful about while pacing the Sega stand, with new titles to show and his studio's *Puyo Puyo* games adding DS and PSP to their staggering list of host platforms

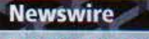
The showfloor's two poles were Square Enix and Bandai: both exhibitors' screens were visible from anywhere on the floor and remained overrun with visitors

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater had a more advantageous display, of course, but congestion and anticipation would see gamers queuing for as long as two hours for their 15-minute place on the demonstration pods. Just like waiting to play *Halo 2* at Game Stars Live, then.

The showfloor's two poles were Square Enix and Bandai: both exhibitors' big screens were visible from practically anywhere on the floor and remained overrun with hundreds of visitors for the duration of the show. While the latter's licensed fare would remain as popular as ever, it was the former that was the show's biggest draw, with one specific title: *Dragon Quest VIII*.

With a November 27 release date set, 2.5 million copies to be sold to retailers in advance and a premium price of ¥9,240 (£48), the Japanese videogame industry is already frantically rescheduling its end-of-year releases. It's a phenomenon from which even Square Enix and Sony are not exempt: Square Enix has new *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy* titles to juggle, while Sony may bask in the sales boost of slimline PS2s, but faces competition to its own high-profile releases such as *GT4*, and possibly even the PSP.

Playable at last, the TGS version confirmed *DQVIII*'s promise, but also raised the eyebrows of the few who had beta tested Level 9's late, lamented *True Fantasy Live Online* due to the titles' similarities. Even so, *DQVIII* seems as vast and polished as could be expected from its extended development – or indeed the weight of public and professional expectation, characterised by a TGS holding its collective breath.



Superheroes gather to mourn Superman

In response to the recent passing of Superman actor Christopher Reeve, the *City Of Heroes* player community has staged memorial gatherings across the MMO's servers. Dedicated players have gone further by donning accessories such as red capes, an 'S' insignia or black armbands as a mark of respect, and are currently petitioning on the game's official forums for a lasting, ideally trademark-infringement-free, tribute to the actor.

Suggestions have ranged from erecting a statue or building park in his honour to naming a hospital (in which felled heroes are respawned) the Reeve Memorial.

Natural disaster hits virtual worlds

Earlier real-world events to have virtual-world repercussions were the storms that battered the United States in late September. Both *Star Wars Galaxies* and the *World Of WarCraft* beta were suspended – much to the distress of their respective playerbases – when their Virginian server-hosting facilities were struck by a tornado. *SWG* experienced only temporary disruption, sparing countless 'grave disturbance in the Force' references, but water seepage into the *WOW* servers saw the beta suspended for three gruelling days.





The translucent Kasumi Blue limited-edition Xbox certainly earned itself a few extra pre-orders from both local visitors and western journalists. Microsoft Japan is also pushing its webcam functionality as another possible inroad into wider acceptance

HARDWARE

New PS2 smaller, lighter, online ready

Sony's fourth PlayStation console primes itself to appeal to both hobbyist fanbase and massmarket consumers

While the Tokyo Game Show was kicking off in Japan, in London Sony was simultaneously arranging its own presentation in order to unveil something new and, apparently, ambitious. Speculation preceding the event had suggested that replacement PS2 hardware was on the cards, but on the morning of September 21 Sony Computer Entertainment Europe COO David Reeves kept a captive audience waiting with talk of how the company's recent performance is a testament to the PlayStation brand's continuing popularity.

As far as branding goes, Sony has yet to officially refer to the hardware as PStwo (despite using a reference on the packaging), but this may change before Christmas

From his position standing alongside an iconic upright PS2 he underlined projected statistics with a laser pointer before arriving at his company's 'right uppercut'. To a hush of anticipation, a spotlight fell on the plinth and the PS2 split open, revealing dry ice and a smaller, slimline version of itself inside – the long-rumoured 'PStwo', not really that much of a surprise at all. The showmanship would have been unusual enough on its own; the sight of Sony's COO, apparently finding the sight of a split, broken PS2 unsightly, trying to covertly mend it during the closing video reel was stranger still; the PS2's stubborn persistence in falling limply apart was borderline slapstick comedy.



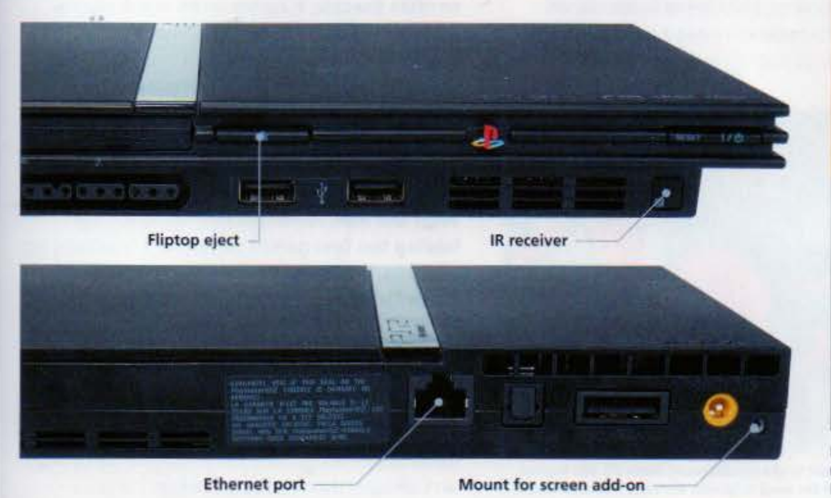
Confusingly, the packaging features both the normal PS2 logo and a 'two' flash

Still, the new machine was enough to garner attention. At roughly the size of a hardback book (28x2.8x15.2cm) and with internal volume down by 75 per cent, the new unit weighs only 900g, partly thanks to a new external power supply (although the machine does now have a built-in ethernet adapter).

Interestingly, the machine is not compatible with PS2 hard drives, and it requires a new type of multitap, currently in production.

As far as branding goes, Sony has yet to officially refer to the hardware as PStwo (despite using a reference on the packaging), but this may change in the run up to the silly Christmas season, during which anything can happen.

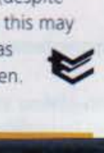

At £100 and appealingly small, the new PS2 is the right price and size to serve as a second machine for use in the home




Popping the thin lid, you almost expect it to raise in a cushioned manner reminiscent of late-'80s audio hardware, but it does not. Instead it feels plasticky. Note the tiny spring which holds it open

PlayStation power

Sony prepares to add to gigantic installed base



Scheduled to appear on shelves across Europe on November 1 and priced in standalone form at 149 euro (£100), the redesigned PS2 is expected to also appear as part of several key pack-in deals, which should ensure that Sony wins the Christmas sales race with ease. With 100 million PS1s and 62.8 million PS2s already installed in homes around the world, the company is retaining a clear lead over its rivals. While the UK can claim sales of 'only' six million PS2s to date, it is claimed that the original PlayStation is currently outselling Nintendo's GameCube across PAL territories.

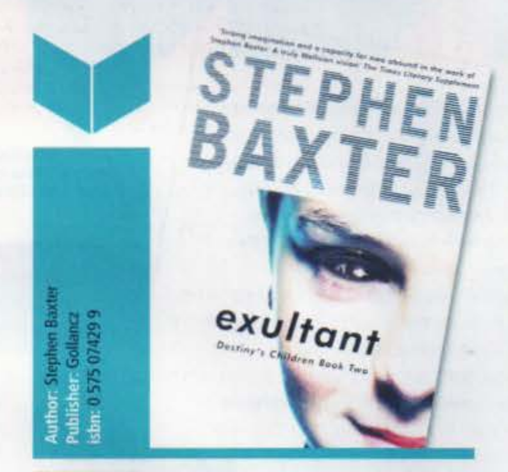
RESURRECTION



Ultima heaven

Bringing a classic back to life with some genius codework

Resurrection of the month comes in the shape of Exult, an engine designed to take the data files from Origin's legendary RPG *Ultima 7: The Black Gate* (and its sequel, *Serpent Isle*) and run the game on modern PCs. It's been playable for a while now, allowing players to complete both adventures with a few enhancements and a few minor flaws. The latest improvement, though, is something of a marvel: Exult now takes the bounding boxes of the two-dimensional sprites and automatically remodels them in 3D, adding an extra dimension to Lord British's realm. It works better on some objects than others, of course – buildings are wonderful, the characters more like skewed cardboard cut-outs – but it's a brilliant piece of lateral thinking, and one that deserves attention. Visit exult.sourceforge.net for more.



EXULTANT

Nothing to do with *Ultima VII*, this fantasy is set in an unsettling future

A year on from the opening of his Destiny's Children trilogy, Stephen Baxter's latest jumps 25,000 years into a future clouded by total war. Having struggled against waves of alien invaders within its solar system, humanity has since pushed far into the galaxy's heart. But now it has met its most implacable foe: the unknowable Xeelee. With spaceships powered by the fabric of space-time and the ability to know what their enemy will do before they do it, they make for a formidable foe. Thanks to the sheer numbers of vat-produced human soldiers, combined with a strict political and religious structure promoting the race to the exclusion of the self, the forces are at stalemate. Three thousand years on, and the tension is growing in the human hierarchy, until local tactical advantage is forced by an individual's act. It's exactly the sort of backdrop that gives Baxter the opportunity to plait together his favoured themes of cosmology, evolution and the more extreme possibilities of quantum physics. Whether it provides a decent enough framework for a battling sci-fi yarn is less clear though. There are some neat touches: The futility of space-war hasn't been done as well since 2000 AD's Halo Jones, while the acceptance of time travel means different 'time-stamped' copies of individuals co-exist. But, as often in the middle of a trilogy, the ending proves something of a let down.

INTERVIEW

Will Jim fix it?

Nintendo's head of marketing talks online, DS and magic eggs



Nintendo DS's wireless functionality is proving to be one of its biggest draws, so what does this mean for Nintendo's overall strategy with multiplayer gaming? And what about the bigger gaming picture? We sat down with **Jim Merrick**, Nintendo's senior director of European marketing, to find out some answers.

Nintendo's still not committed to online; what proportion of people do you think want to play traditional online games?

There's certainly a lot of interest in the technology, a lot of technology-driven demand for online gaming, but is there demand for online gaming based on gameplay? I'm not so sure. I have a background working on online for Nintendo, we did a lot of work building infrastructure and systems, but we couldn't get a strong sense of consumer demand. The value proposition just hasn't been there. That's not to say that online gaming isn't a lot of fun for a narrow sector of the market, it just hasn't hit mass market yet. I'm not sure that average Joe gamer perceives enough benefit to outweigh the hurdles.

But those hurdles – technological and financial – are diminishing. What will the situation be when they become negligible?

I think online can be a compelling feature in the right game, so I can play with people I know rather than strangers, rather than being beaten by an eight-year-old who has devoted a significant portion of their young life to that particular game.



The N64 played host to the revolutionary *Mario 64*, and Merrick suggests we'll see the same leap with Nintendo's next hardware

Nintendo has a lot of properties which could be compelling online – let's say *Pokémon*, that could work very well. Would that mean that people would stop playing *Pokémon* offline? Not at all. It's just a feature, a strong feature. It's like multiplayer gaming. A strong multiplayer game must always stand on its own feet as a strong singleplayer game because your friends aren't always around.

Is Nintendo trying to pioneer a different kind of online gaming – more local, more physical?

I like online gaming – wireless gaming as an extension of multiplayer gaming, of social gaming. Why is it that *Mario Kart* or *GoldenEye* are so much fun? It's because I'm in the same room as you and I can sense your pain. I can taunt you and revel in my victory with you. And I lose a lot of that in an online environment – even with Xbox Live or even with a *SOCOM* headset, it's not the same. And it's the social gaming aspect that I'm excited about.

How much do you gain by letting Sony and Microsoft pioneer online gaming and make the mistakes for you?

Certainly, financially it's an incredible advantage. I'm not quite sure how much money Microsoft is willing to lose on Xbox or Xbox Live. It appears to be an awful lot. They're proving technology, they're testing consumer response and we can take advantage of all of that. At the end of the day, as is so often the case, it comes down to the games themselves. I don't feel that we're at a disadvantage. I know the people who want to see Nintendo compete on a technological level feel that we're way behind the times. But it isn't a technology battle. We're about entertainment, and I don't think the entertainment is there yet.

With the N64, Nintendo was criticised for having too few games which took too long to develop. You've addressed that with the GameCube. But the N64 had two Edge 10s, the GC has had none. Have you lost something with your new policy?

I don't think so. Look at *Mario 64*. A phenomenal game, 10/10 as you say – thank you very much! – but it was a revolutionary game. It was the first game where 3D gaming really worked. GameCube isn't offering that kind of revolution. It's an





Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles is still the most ambitious thirdparty link-up game, and yet it fell short. Hopefully the DS sequel will perfect its ideas



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

The Strangerhood is the latest (read: second) show from Rooster Teeth Productions, the team behind *Halo* sitcom Red vs Blue. It takes *The Sims 2* as its engine, interesting not just because Simsville has a completely different feel to Blood Gulch, but because these days they're too well noticed to be entirely irreverent without some comeback. Hence EA legitimising The Strangerhood; in a Q&A session after their recent presentation at ResFest, The Red vs Blue crew promised that the publisher's input was limited to ensuring their material matches with the game's age rating. They also promised less swearing, and more innuendo.

Site: **The Strangerhood**
URL: **www.strangerhood.com/home.php**



evolution of 3D gameplay in the same way that PS2 is an evolution of PS1. Historically, we've gone from revolution to evolution. NES was a revolution, SNES was an evolution; N64 revolution, GC evolution, hence 'Revolution is coming'. So where does that revolution come from? We don't have a fourth dimension handy, waiting in the wings, so what you're going to see is Nintendo experimenting with human interface technology, whether it's the touchscreen – we've done a lot over the years, introducing rumble, introducing analogue. We see this as an evolving area, and I think Nintendo can show its leadership there.

Another criticism of the N64 was that Nintendo failed to effectively court thirdparty publishers. It was something you pledged to improve with the GameCube, and yet we've seen a similar drop-off in support. Isn't that worrying?
Yes, it is. It's an ongoing challenge for us. We have to compete very hard with Microsoft and Sony not just in offering a good business model, but good relationship management with these companies. We've got a great relationship with EA. We're working very closely with Capcom and Konami – it's easier of course in Japan, where these relationships are older, but we're working very hard across the world.

"I would like to have games which are designed around one platform. If you take a game which is the same on every platform, then you don't need it on the DS"

So what is the barrier to these third parties? Is it the licensing costs, the demographic issues, the controller design?
It's everything – well, I should say, I don't know if the controller design is one of the issues or not! Demographics are perceived – oftentimes we'll find a thirdparty will bring us games which are skewed younger because that's where they perceive that the GameCube has its strength. That may be true, but you can look at it the other way around and say there's a market opportunity, there's a gap. If I don't have a football game on that platform it should be an opportunity. So we really have to work with third parties so they see the opportunities and don't try to pigeonhole us.



Nintendo has tried to improve the situation this generation and it hasn't managed it. Will you have to try something different with the next generation of hardware?
Look, I don't have, you know, the magic egg that will solve the problem. It's something that Nintendo is working on and trying to communicate more directly with the licensees. We're running develop conferences for the DS, it's that sort of thing that will improve things – getting information out to developers sooner, getting dev kits out sooner, making the business model more appealing by keeping the costs of development tools down.

Nintendo DS is a bold vision for the future of game development. Doesn't this kind of innovation make it even harder for thirdparties to come to you, as they have get their heads around a whole new way of designing games, which are only going to be compatible with one system?
Well, to some extent, yes, that's true. I would like to have games which are designed exclusively around one platform, because if you take a game which is essentially the same on every platform, then you don't really need it on the DS. If you take something like *Pac-Man*, when we announced that we were going to show *Pac-Man* at E3 everyone's eyes rolled back in there heads and said: "*Pac-Man* again, are you kidding?", but when they saw what we'd done with it, they loved it.

But *Pac-Man* is an interesting example. Namco was one of the few companies to embrace GC-GBA connectivity, Nintendo's last big hardware innovation, with *Pac-Man Vs.* But it had so little faith in the project it wouldn't even market it separately. Nintendo has been the only company to fully exploit GC/GBA link-up. How does that change with DS?
The connectivity issue was a big challenge. We saw an opportunity to use some of the features of the GBA, some of the features of the GC to the betterment of both. But you're right, it creates a challenge for the publisher. For them, their GC teams and their GBA teams may be in separate buildings, separate companies even, and it's hard to get them to agree on what can be done. For Nintendo, we're working in-house and it's much easier. We may have miscalculated in terms of third-party support. I think we didn't communicate fully – to the publishers or the consumers – what the benefits of connectivity were. For an incremental amount of programming you can add fantastic value and really boost sales. But we didn't communicate it effectively. That's something we're going to change with the DS.

Flattery gets everywhere

Rare follows Rockstar in tipping a wink to some mag or other

Once upon a time, Rare's supersquirrel Conker amused himself with a handheld console, yet now he's grown up a little he's taken to reading, as this image from the forthcoming Xbox title *Conker: Live & Reloaded* illustrates. Drudge's next-month page is in an odd place, but the price seems about right, plus the entire concept is nicked from *Vice City*, and you can't argue with that. Expect more spoofery in the finished title, due in March.



The original pastiche, as seen in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Use your scope to get a good look at that loving detail





If you've seen Way Of The Rodent's Paper Arcade project, you'll already be familiar with cute little arcade cabs. Witness the Japanese equivalent. Wow

Alongside more famous pieces of hardware, there was also a huge variety of handsome oddities on display. The early Japanese Pong clone, Video-Attack (below), was one of many machines which marked out a pivotal shift in gaming innovation from the west to the east

EVENT

Japan plays with past

Tokyo's National Museum Of Science hosts major exhibition dedicated to videogame history

In the dramatic setting of Tokyo's Ueno Park, gamers – young and old – had a chance to examine more than 50 years of videogame history at the TV-G@ME and Digital Science Exposition. Featuring a vast display of hardware, prototypes and documentation, the exhibition was split into three sections – Prehistory, the first steps towards modern gaming; The Arcade, tracing the genesis of videogames; and Home Consoles, celebrating 35 years of home gaming. The exhibition took the concept of prehistory very seriously, beginning with the very first calculators and microchips and including early prototypes such as the Altair 8800, Xerox, Intel 4004, IBM Osborn, Apple I and NEC PC-8001. From these grew the pioneers of videogaming: Tennis For Two, *Pong*, the Brown Box, the Odyssey, *Space War* and the Atari 2600. The original Brown Box documentation proved particularly impressive, describing most of the features which still form the basis of gaming today.

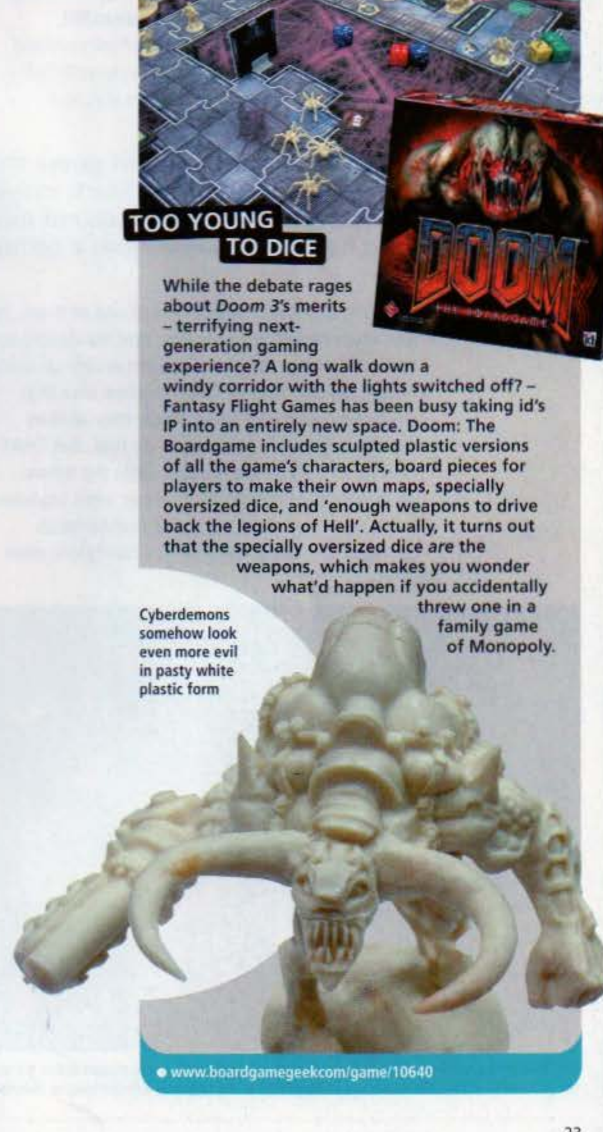
As a sideline, the first version of Windows programmed by Bill Gates was also present: written in only a week, it was run without any prior testing and performed perfectly, without any bugs.

The arcade section was dominated by Namco, Taito and Sega, the three names that built and developed the arcade business. Small wooden cabinet replicas showed how arcade layouts used to be planned, and revolutionary designs, such as Sega's *OutRun* cabinet, were on display. The home console section was probably the most well-documented section of the entire exhibition, with a huge number of consoles and family computers on show – mostly Japanese, but also including some pieces of exotic westernalia like the Atari ST and Amiga 1000.

Overall, the exhibition was mainly focused on the science behind gaming history: how it evolved and changed our everyday lives. Looking around at these magnificent, silent machines, the halls had a slight graveyard atmosphere. Many companies have tried to claim their share of the booming gaming market, but these forgotten consoles are a lesson in the reality of just how few names have survived. The emphasis on hardware also meant there was little to communicate how these machines had been used and understood at the time they were available – no software, no game adverts, no cultural context. Fair enough, you could say, for a museum of science, but perhaps a disappointment for the many young visitors who had never seen these systems in their prime.



The National Museum Of Science provided an austere but spacious home for the exhibition. Its shop was stuffed with gaming merchandise



TOO YOUNG TO DICE

While the debate rages about *Doom 3*'s merits – terrifying next-generation gaming experience? A long walk down a windy corridor with the lights switched off? – Fantasy Flight Games has been busy taking id's IP into an entirely new space. Doom: The Boardgame includes sculpted plastic versions of all the game's characters, board pieces for players to make their own maps, specially oversized dice, and 'enough weapons to drive back the legions of Hell'. Actually, it turns out that the specially oversized dice *are* the weapons, which makes you wonder what'd happen if you accidentally threw one in a family game of Monopoly.

Cyberdemons somehow look even more evil in pasty white plastic form

● www.boardgamegeekcom/game/10640

The truth behind the biggest PC game ever

It's sold more copies than any other computer game, and yet The Sims' history is a convoluted one. We went in search of answers

As *The Sims 2* begins to really get its teeth into gamers the world over, we thought it'd be an appropriate time to catch up with **Will Wright**, head of Maxis and the man behind the multimillion-selling original game, to discover the truth behind his success.

So, is it true you had a problem getting the original concept of *The Sims* greenlit?
Yeah, there was a lot of resistance within Maxis from almost everyone. We did a very early focus group in '93, where we presented like, four different ideas, and *The Sims* was one of them. We just kinda described the game, and the description was pretty close to what *The Sims* ended up being, almost exactly. And that was the one idea that everyone hated. The other three, they all liked them, said: "Yeah, you should do that. But THAT one sucks." I don't remember what the others were, they were never done, never went anywhere. But based upon that, a) I never trusted focus groups again in my life, and b) actually got more motivated to do the idea, because I knew they didn't understand what I was talking about. So, within the company it was kind of a struggle to get one or two programmers devoted to it. I was struggling, I'd taken over a small group in Maxis – used to be our tools guys – and made them the *Sims* group. They really liked the idea, but we were kind of struggling until EA bought Maxis. They were really, really into it, and for the first time I got resources on the project.

"I've never seen a really big hit game that was a collective decision at the start, maybe with the exception of sequels. A brand new, innovative thing has never come from a group"



The Sims series has made the crossover to consoles (Xbox iteration pictured) but it's in the PC market where the real money's been made. The sequel is now picking up the baton

Do you think focus groups mislead because those judging them have preconceived notions of what they like in games?
I thought about that. When we were doing the focus group we were describing the idea for the game, and in my head, in my imagination I was playing it and it was really fun. When you give someone a brief description they're gonna build a different game in their imagination. They're gonna fill in the blanks differently – all the millions of details that make the game fun or boring, they're gonna fill in the wrong way. I think it's a little unfair to expect someone, based on a brief description, to build the exact same idea in their head. Their game won't be as fun as my game, and they will think it sucks, because their game DOES suck.

So doesn't it follow that game design, as a creative process, has to be an individual thing?
I think at that stage it does, yeah. Eventually you end up with a hundred or more people on the team, and it has to be something of a collaborative process. But getting the idea off the ground, that usually takes one very strong creative vision. I've never seen a really big hit game that was a collective decision at the start, maybe with the exception of sequels. A brand new, innovative thing has never come from a group, always a person. Then it's a matter of that person snowballing things, persuading people that 'oh yeah, we can do this', and then the executives, and then the marketing people. It's a process that consists of convincing more and more people, and at each stage you get more and more evidence that it's going to work.

It's quite paradoxical, isn't it? That people see Electronic Arts as this big, terrifying conglomerate, but it's EA's financial support that pushed your individual creativity through.
Yeah. Not to disrespect the press, but the press is always looking for the easy story to tell. It's easy to tell the story of the giant corporation that's churning, y'know, whatever. A lot of people come up to me and say: "Oh, y'know, I heard that EA tried to cancel *The Sims*!" and somehow this story's got twisted over retellings, but actually they were the ones who rescued it...



Will Wright: would you trust this man to make you a series of games about little computer people that would go on to make many millions of dollars?

That said, EA took *The Sims*, and there've been, what, seven expansion packs since? Was producing so many add-ons always a part of the plan?
No, it wasn't. When we were designing the game we probably spent, oh, an extra year in develpment making it as expandable as we possible could, in the hope that we could leverage that expansion. Had the game been mediocre or a flop, that money would have been wasted, but we were lucky it paid off. It paid off more than we thought – I thought that extra year, because of the expandability of the game, we might end up doubling the sales, not just with the expansions we were creating, but also with all the customisations the players were creating.

Did you ever feel there was a danger the audience – many of whom were new to gaming – might get tired of *The Sims*?
It's interesting, and a little counter-intuitive. With each expansion pack we tried to experiment with different things, so in a sense they became a way for us to learn which ideas worked and which didn't. A lot of the expansion packs directly influenced *The Sims 2*, and without all those packs



we'd have been flying in the dark a lot more, in terms of the directions we expanded in. Also, if you look at what you actually did in the expansion backs, certain ones seemed like major breakthroughs. Like *Hot Date*, for example, which did much better than the first two. We discovered areas that were much more important, ones where we hit the mark and thought: "Oh yeah, that works". Some people play games as disposable entertainment like a movie – you start, play for a week, put it away, go beginning, middle, end, the movie model. Some of our players played it that way, put it away, thought: "That was fun". But a lot of our players play it more like a hobby, and if people ask them: "Do you play games?" they say: "Oh yeah, I play *The Sims*," and they've been playing it for two years. They're who the expansion packs are targeted at – it's not like we're putting a gun to anyone's head and saying: "Buy this or we'll kill the puppy."

And players could buy into any combination of expansions they wanted, too.

Oddly enough, that's what caused us to stop at seven. We did the first expansion pack, and we had to test it with the game. When we did the second, we had to test it with the game, and with the game and the first expansion pack. With the third one, we had to test with, like, four combinations. And so on, and by the seventh pack, we had to test like 64 different combinations, and by that stage we were like, there's no way we can test an eighth one. Easy to make, impossible to test.

So in the end *The Sims* series was actually killed by mathematics?

Yeah, basically. By exponentional reasoning.



The things people say about videogames

"It is unlikely that we would hire someone who didn't show good proficiency at a Game Boy or online poker or similar video-type game where hand-to-eye coordination is important"
Mary McDonnel, president of Geneva Trading, explains how being good at *OutRun 2* could make you rich.

"Let me tell you something. Those little women at the Tokyo Game Show with those portable consoles strapped to them... What you didn't see is that those women were having to go recharge the batteries every two hours!"
Nintendo's **Reggie Fils-Aime** takes a stab at the PSP during the Gamers' Summit in Seattle.

"I think the real indicator will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17... The next big emotional breakthrough in gaming is being able to tell a story that is consistent throughout the narrative. If the game is 15 levels, it's just like 15 chapters in a story"
Steven Spielberg demonstates how much he's been paying attention.



Molyneux: "If you're a developer with a public profile, then you have to expect criticism. I think that it's better to address it head-on rather than hoping it will all go away"

SPECIAL REPORT

Molyneux acknowledges critics

"I'm incapable of sticking to any pre-planned PR strategy"

Lionhead chief **Peter Molyneux** is no stranger to controversy over how closely the reality of his games matches his boundless vision for them. But his decision to publicly apologise on Lionhead's forums regarding the typically controversial *Fable* (reviewed in **E**142) was a frank acknowledgement of this discrepancy.

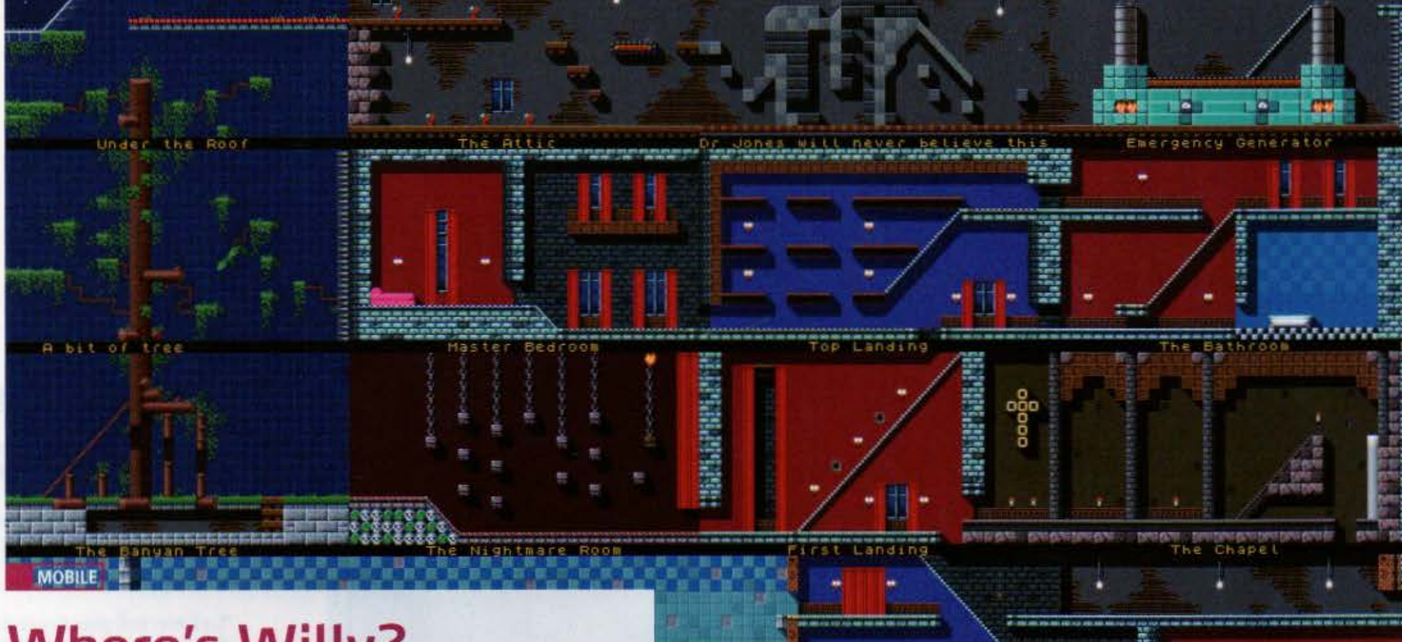
We asked Molyneux if this new, somewhat humbled stance indicated a change in the enthusiastic personality that has won him as many supporters as critics.

"I can't see myself changing as a person: I'd find it very hard to curb my enthusiasm, as it's bound up with why I make games," he confessed. "What I will do is highlight that some of the features I'm demoing are experimental, and that when you show a game during its development it's just a snapshot of how the game is at that moment."

Given that the nature of his blue-sky titles has attracted criticism dating back to his work with Bullfrog, we questioned if there was a specific issue that prompted his decision. "The real catalyst was the complaints that we were getting on [Lionhead's forums], which we take very seriously, that people felt cheated certain features hadn't made it into the game," he said. "We never had any intention to mislead, and I wanted to explain that we couldn't sacrifice the quality of the game for ideas which didn't add to the experience."

To the suggestion that future Lionhead titles might be promoted with a more typically corporate, controlled release of assets, Molyneux remained ebullient – "I can assure you that I'm incapable of sticking to any pre-planned PR strategy for very long" – indicating that his intention will be to qualify, rather than omit, his passion: "I'm always going to talk about my dreams, but I'll be clearer that these are dreams that may or may not make it into a finished game."



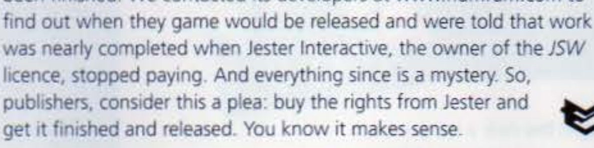


MOBILE

Where's Willy?

Classic 8bit platformer threatens to shine on mobiles, then disappears. Smith fans despair

Remember the place depicted above? It is, of course, the mansion from classic 8bit platformer *Jet Set Willy*. Except it sort of isn't, since this is an overhauled version of the game, each room recreated with gameplay that is true to the original but with full-colour backgrounds and sprites. And it runs on most game-friendly mobile phone handsets. Or at least it would if it'd actually



been finished. We contacted its developers at www.numfum.com to find out when they game would be released and were told that work was nearly completed when Jester Interactive, the owner of the *JSW* licence, stopped paying. And everything since is a mystery. So, publishers, consider this a plea: buy the rights from Jester and get it finished and released. You know it makes sense.



AT A STORE NEAR YOU

What we said about games hitting shelves this month

Donkey Konga (GC) E133, 6/10

'Confusion causes panic, panic causes hysteria, and hysteria is exactly what players want from a party game... a uniquely entertaining experience'

Mario Vs Donkey Kong (GBA) E139, 7/10

'It's a delight to behold the system of checks and balances, rules and relationships at work here, some of them steeped deep in Mario lore'

Gradius V (PS2) E140, 9/10

'The biggest joy of *Gradius V* is that it's equally regressive and progressive. It's utterly and completely *now*, but also respectful of its elders'

Metal Slug 3 (Xbox) E127, 8/10 (PS2 version)



'The detail is exceptional, the imagination apparent in every animation a joy to witness. *Metal Slug 3* is worth playing countless times'

Newswire



Gizmondo in Conflict with SCi

Gizmondo manufacturer Tiger Telematics has announced a 12-game deal with SCi. Although no specific titles have yet been confirmed, Gizmondo will have access to SCi's back catalogue – which features titles such as the *Conflict* series, *Richard Burns Rally* and *Carmageddon* – as well as its future releases, which include film/comic tie-in *Constantine* and tactical action game *Battlestations: Midway*. Gizmondo, which launches in the UK in November, has been promising major game deals for some time, and this announcement dramatically increases the number of high-profile games available for the system. No information is currently available on how or if the SCi titles will take advantage of the Gizmondo's GPS and camera capabilities.



DEVELOPER DIARY

Tameem Antoniades of Just Add Monsters begins his next-gen story…

It's March 2003 and I'm sat with some colleagues ready to hear Bungie talk *Halo* at GDC. Ed Fries, head of Microsoft Games Studios, comes up to us: "We've just had our first week's sales for *Kung Fu Chaos*. It's done 10,000 units." Ten-thousand units sounds crap to me. Ed, sensing our disdain, continues: "That's good for a week." I look at my colleagues. They all have a 10,000-units-sounds-crap expression on their faces.

Rewind to January 2003. We've just wrapped up *Kung Fu Chaos*, our first game at JAM. It was a smooth ride. The best development experience I've ever had. Nina, Mike and I founded JAM, scaling up from three people working from Mike's bedroom to 22 people delivering the game on time and on budget while exceeding all of the quality benchmarks set out by Microsoft. We didn't even have a crunch period. Contrary to popular opinion, everyone we worked with at MS was a passionate gamer who really knew what they were doing. The same couldn't be said for their marketing and PR people who were a bunch of… well, you get the idea.

It started when they showed an early build of

Contrary to popular opinion, everyone at MS was a passionate gamer who really knew what they were doing. The same couldn't be said for their marketing and PR people…

Kung Fu Chaos to the most influential magazines and websites in the US without our knowledge. The game was untextured, had placeholder sound, no effects and the combat was only a rough implementation. From there it just got worse but I'm not going to go through the list of cock-ups because it drives me nuts just thinking about them. However, as the first reviews come in, things were looking up: 92 per cent; 4 out of 5; 9 out of 10; "One of the best games I've ever played" said Penny Arcade; then the US's biggest print magazine scores it 50 per cent. Scratch record. "I want to punch this game in the throat", they said as they took turns to bash it for being racist. Subsequent reviews also decide to take the moral high ground.

A bunch of gaming magazines, newspapers and radio stations sent us mails to offer support and defend the game. The PR guys respond with: "Our goal is to make sure no one talks about this. If we stop them from writing about the game we win". So only those who think the game is racist are given a voice and the game is left to rot on the shelves with no marketing or PR support. Yet the message we get from MS is that they are interested in a sequel. Ever since we gave them a concept trailer for *Kung Fu Chaos*, MS have wanted developers to give them trailers to pre-visualise the games they are publishing. We start creating a design doc and a concept trailer for the sequel called *Kung Fu Story*. It's an amazing piece of work available to Edge readers at www.justaddmonsters.com/edge

Forward to GDC 2003 again. After hearing the sales figures we know that a sequel isn't going to happen even though MS is saying otherwise. Our options are looking grim. With no sequel in sight, we have two choices: create a brand new IP or do a work-for-hire gig. Our *Kung Fu Chaos* engine was really only suited to *Kung Fu Chaos*, and the cost of re-engineering it for a licence would mean that we wouldn't be able to compete with those who specialise in low-cost licences. Creating a new IP is looking grim too: our market research shows that sequels and licences dominate the end of a console cycle. Even if we pull off a new IP, the investment we would have to make on an updated engine would probably only last one game in the current stage of the console life cycle.

What our research does show is that while thirdperson action adventures are big, the first generation of games in this genre are always crap. Nina, Mike and I originally came from Sony Cambridge, a studio that specialised in thirdperson action games, and so we would be treading familiar ground. If we start now, a full year or two before most developers even think about next-gen development, we would have the time to craft a great game and release it early in the next-gen console cycle. Perhaps we could pull off a *Halo*.

As expected, several weeks after our presentation to MS, they say no to *Kung Fu Story*. We are already busy designing a next-generation original IP codenamed Heavenly Sword, and so begins this diary of the dreams and nightmares that define next-gen game development.

Top: the scale of the levels in Just Add Monsters' next-gen project Heavenly Sword is patently ambitious. Every aspect features full dynamic lighting and shadowing through a 24-hour clock cycle. The developer claims that no other game features this level of shadowing. Above: the aftermath of a fight with over 30 bad guys

Internet Game Of The Month

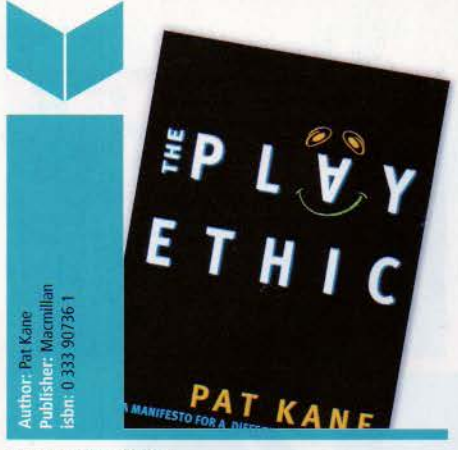
Zoo Keeper

jp.shockwave.com/games/puzzles/zookeeper/zookeeper.html

The gaming industry has never settled on a precise answer for when a 'tribute' to a game mechanic crosses the divide into copyright infringement. The fact remains, however, that finding familiar pleasures on a new format can be an enormous – if guilty – pleasure. The Shockwave preview for *Zoo Keeper*, Robot Communications' DS puzzle game, certainly owes a lot to a certain browser-based game which has popped caps into the pleasure centres of millions of bored office workers across the world, but it's hard to hold that against it.

Not least because, somehow, this is *better*. Better balanced, better presented, it's somehow genuinely absorbing rather than coma-inducingly compulsive. The only frustration is knowing just how much better it would be with a touchscreen and a stylus.

That's not the end of the 'tributes', of course. One of the reasons that this game will make you happy is that it will remind you of the marvellous *Baku Baku Animal*. And if ever there was a game crying out for a DS conversion, that's it.



Author: Pat Kane
Publisher: Macmillan
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THE PLAY ETHIC

A thoughtful look at modern life from a man who was once looking for Linda

Considering Pat Kane's career path, he should have a lot to say about how play might fit within our post-modern miasma of work, leisure and the in-between. Starting out as half of 1980s Glaswegian proto-synth-popsters Hue And Cry, followed by a stint as Lord Rector of Glasgow University as well as being a co-founder of The Sunday Herald and a general talking head (now professional consultant), on all things meeja, he's certainly lead a charmed life. The background of how easily such an interesting existence was carved out isn't something Kane himself comments on.

It's probably fair to surmise, though, that despite his detestation of the very concept of the protestant work ethic, he's had to work hard to play so fine. And it is this which is the irony of the play ethic, which he posts as a 21st century theme in direct competition to Weber's working class schema. With the rise of individualism, and all that entails with respect to society, education and family groupings, Kane proposes play as the key definition of what it now is to be human.

It's nothing if not a utopian vision, but the more significant (and unanswered) question remains, can such a concept be extended beyond the thoughtful elite such as Kane to the odd-job call centre workers who are our equivalent of the old factory drones?

Continue

Bioshock
System Shock 2's spiritual successor? Yes, please

The power of ten
Two years and 11 months of holding our breaths

M64 DS minigames
Faces and bombs! Faces and bombs!

Quit

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The wrong kind of global release plan

Jack Thompson
You're just not making any sense, man

Exclusive review deals
They don't actually help anyone, do they?

INCOMING

The shock of the new

Cold Fear

PC, PS2, Xbox/Ubisoft/March 2005



A fresh game from Darkworks, creator of the *Alone In The Dark* series, finds an intrepid US coastguard threatened by storm and horror on a Russian tanker and a desolate oil rig. Already showing a suitably Carpenter-like atmosphere

Tsukiyoni Saraba

PS2/Taito/December (Japan), TBC (UK)



With an RPG-heavy staff including the director of the first two *Suikodens*, few were expecting Taito's new title to be a Matrix-styled gun-fu shooter. The hook is that the slow-mo is a necessity rather than a gimmick: bullets are instantly lethal

Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap

GBA/Nintendo/November 12



Capcom won its *Zelda* spurs with the *Oracles* games, but there was always something a little lacking. *The Minish Cap*, released in next month in Europe ahead of the rest of the world, looks set to add what the earlier games lacked: spark

Ace Combat 5: Squadron Leader

PS2/Namco/October 25 (US), Q1 2005 (UK)



Having seen US and Japanese release as *The Unsung War* by the time you read this, the latest in Namco's engaging aerial combat series introduces a new conflict, new planes and, for the first time, (optional) manual takeoffs and landings

Imperator

PC/Mythic/2005



The *Dark Age Of Camelot* developer's alternate-future MMO – where the Roman Empire rules the Earth and the stars – continues to intrigue with a trickle of information and prototype (in-engine) shots of the futuristic capital's skyline

King Kong

GC, PC, PS2, Xbox/Ubisoft/Q4 2005



Ubisoft has set up Michel Ancel (above, centre, with Peter Jackson and fellow Montpellier developers) to develop the film tie-in. Hopefully Ancel and co can inject it with the same vivacity as they did the late, lamented *Beyond Good And Evil*



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

'It nearly killed me'

Koji Aizawa, editor in chief of Famitsu PS2 magazine, offers his own take on the Tokyo Game Show

The Tokyo Game Show did not lack charismatic titles this year, and among the most eagerly awaited were *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*. On the hardware side, you could add the PSP and this new PS2, which as I'm sure you've seen is so thin. There were also a lot more of the foreign press attending this TGS, and we can't forget the visitors who came en masse. They were so numerous that it wasn't unusual to have to wait more than two hours in order to play a game. Working in such conditions nearly killed me.

Square Enix is looking unbeatable for the rest of this year and into the next, and I really believe sales of *Dragon Quest VIII* will reach the three-million mark in Japan. Yes, Japanese players love their RPGs, and their favourites are *Dorakue* (a contraction of *Dragon Quest* in Japanese pronunciation) and *Final Fantasy*. But *Dorakue* has a very special place in Japan: it was the first RPG to really succeed in gaining a broader audience. Even people who don't normally play videogames, from housewives to grandparents, they all play it. This time, Level 5 was in charge of the development, a company well known in Japan for *Dark Chronicle* on PS2, and their beautiful toon-shading is finally bringing life to Toriyama Akira's artwork. I know Akihiro Hino of Level 5 very well – we go out for drinks sometimes – and I'm really personally excited to see this game and how well he has been able to understand the essence of *Dragon Quest*.

Because of the merger, Square Enix is in a position to deliver an incredible number of new games. In addition to *Dorakue*, I was impressed by *Radiata Stories* [see p58], a very promising RPG developed by Tri-Ace, which is famous for its *Star Ocean* series.

Konami usually comes to the show with tons of games, but this year only three of them really managed to catch my attention: *MGS3*, *Enthusia* and *Rumble Roses*. There's probably nothing left to say about *MGS3* except that it is really impressive, and beyond that it will be up to everyone to play it and draw their own conclusions.

Konami's driving game, *Enthusia*, seems to have much to offer, and I had a chance to speak with its creator Manabu Akita on the show floor. He told me he had invested a lot of his time and passion in this game, and hopes for it to be the crowning achievement of his ten-year career – quite something considering he was responsible for *Rage Racer*!

Rumble Roses is a very sexy female wrestling game that received a great deal of enthusiasm from players. That was a surprise to those of us who had thought female wrestling would prove too limited a market, compared to the big-name wrestling titles. Well, this game may change that – I'm sure you can guess why.

Dorakue has a very special place in Japan: it was the first RPG to really succeed in gaining a broader audience. Even people who don't normally play videogames, from housewives to grandparents, they all play it

Sony's huge booth was devoted to the PSP. There were around 20 playable titles on the handheld, but infuriatingly still no launch date or price. So, despite the PSP's prominence, it was the new slimline PS2 that had the most success. The machine is incredibly thin and small, the sort of technical achievement that in many ways sums up

Sony's approach. It is perfectly adapted for the very small homes of most Japanese people – I already have two PS2s at home, but I still plan to buy one of these, so that I can easily take one with me when I travel.

As for Sony's games, *Wild Arms 4* surprised me, as it was quite a departure for the series with its new tactical battles. I liked the look of *Genji*, an action game developed by Yoshiki Okamoto, formerly of Capcom, and of course *Wanda To Kyozo* [see p42].

Looking around the show, I was particularly pleased to see that Sega was back in force. Their TGS booth was spectacular, and its arcade division is going relatively well, though I have to admit that the consumer side of the business is still not in good shape. However, many of its titles are still in development, and there are many that have not yet been revealed: if all goes to plan, Sega should have a very interesting year. I was very pleased by *Kiminotamenara Shineru* (*Feel The Magic XY/XX*), the Nintendo DS title developed by Sonic Team. *Sega Rally 2005* was still at a very early stage, but it was good to see the series return.

As for the rest of the show, Microsoft's Xbox was doing its best, and the other big companies like Namco, Capcom, Bandai, Koei, Tecmo and Atlus all have titles that should suit Japanese tastes and lead to good sales (at least in this territory).

Having spoken with lots of developers and businessmen, the Japanese economy looks to be getting back on track, and the effect of this upturn in the games industry is being widely anticipated. We have certainly waited long enough for it.



The prominence of the Nvidia girls was perhaps not as much of a surprise as it might have been. PC gaming, particularly MMORPGs (such as *Lineage II*, above) are beginning to flourish in Japan right now



Photography: **Nick Wilson**



Q&A

DOMINIK DIAMOND & JOHNNY FFINCH

Together, they made GamesMaster. Now, they're reviving its spirit with a successor that is a celebration of the form wrapped up in the sketch-style format of The Fast Show. Somewhere, Posh Spice, Spongebob Squarepants and The Rolling Stones fit in, too...

Dominik Diamond is unhappy. Not only because he's just flown in from Italy, where he watched Celtic lose 3-1 to AC Milan in the most painful way imaginable, but because not five minutes ago he left his mobile phone in a black cab and can't work out how to get it back. You can tell Dominik Diamond is unhappy because he's swearing – properly, cover-your-children's-ears-style swearing, not with violence but exasperation – at the receptionist, down the phone, at the phone, at the door, at us.

There've been better starts to interviews. We're here, at Gamer.TV's studios in west London, to talk to Diamond about his new project: When Games Attack, an irreverent look at videogames, the people who play them, and the industry that creates them. Along for the ride is the series' producer, Johnny Ffinch, who also produced GamesMaster and fields the phonecall from the taxi driver that leads to the return of Diamond's phone. Irritation melts into relief, but those scanning this article for soundbites can rest easy: he's more than happy to get angry again...

Tell us about When Games Attack.
Johnny Ffinch: I guess, as a rather catch-all phrase, I'd say it's the alternative videogame show. Bravo already has a show for gamers that has reviews, previews, news, and features in it. There's no point us replicating all of that, so we've tried to make a show that's really... Well, if Bravo's Gamer.TV show is factual, this show is entertainment. We're trying to make a show that's entertaining, and about celebrating and enjoying videogame culture.

And how did you get involved, Dominik?
Dominik Diamond: Johnny happened to mention that they were making the show, and I said...
JF: Well, I didn't even bother asking you...
DD: No, he didn't ask me, he just said he was coming up with it. And he mentioned going to America to film stuff, and I suddenly felt a pang of nostalgia for when Johnny and I used to go to America to film stuff for GamesMaster. So I said: "Y'know, if you're coming up with it from scratch, I'd be interested in seeing what you're coming up with." And his ideas for the show were absolutely... well, it was like he'd sat down and written: 'What would Dominik like to do? What did Dominik like doing best in GamesMaster? If he was presenting it, what could he do?' So, he did that, I thought it was a fantastic show. And then he basically said if I didn't do it they'd get Iain Lee. And I thought that was really, really cruel. I thought people have really suffered enough. I thought it was really pretty low to do that.

Did you have any involvement at the development stage?
DD: None at all.
JF: I asked Dominik first, because I've asked Dominik a number of times before and he's always refused to do a videogame show. But like any strong presenter, as soon as they come on board the whole show begins to adapt to them, and there's an enormous amount of Dominik's input in there.
DD: Well, no, Johnny came up with it on paper. But since I signed up it's all me. [Laughs] Everything is me. Every single thing about the show, every good bit, every funny thing, it is all me. Basically, I've done everything since then. Everything.

Why did you refuse to get involved with another videogame show until now?
DD: It's like someone leaving The Rolling Stones, and going to set up their own band. It'd be crap. That's the thing about GamesMaster – what's the point in doing a videogame show after you've done the one that everyone remembers? The best one? So yeah, the thing about this is that... Johnny's right when he says that Gamer's factual and this is entertainment. I'd go further, I think this is actually... well, if you look at different genres, like sport, or music – sport on television, you've got serious sports shows and you've got funny sports shows. You've got straight music shows and funny music shows. There's no reason why videogames, as a culture, can't be as strong as sport and music, so why can't it have a comedy show? And this is like The Fast Show. A lot of this is sketches, there really is sketch-based comedy, y'know, from the

starting point of videogames. Not since the days of The One and PC Zone have people treated videogames as a subject for comedy. Well, we did it on GamesMaster, but we still had that rigid framework, with the challenges and such. This is a genuine, bona fide comedy show about videogames.

What problems are there making videogame TV these days?

JF: I don't think there are many problems peculiar to videogames. These days game clearance is an issue, which it never used to be. In the old days game publishers never used to care what you'd do with their game. These days they're a bit more wised up. I suppose we've used a lot of old games, too, and they're quite hard to track down. But the major problems with TV are always the same – budget and time.

DD: There's also other things, like when you're away filming at Universal Studios or something, that's always hard. We did this thing on a Mummy ride, and we wanted to mount a camera on the front, pointing at me, because we'd done that on the rollercoaster at GamesMaster and it was really fun. But you can't do that any more – in the old days we'd just stand up and say: "Is it all right if we stick a camera at the front?" and they'd be like: "Yeah, whatever," but now it's like 57 billion forms...



Returning to something you mentioned earlier: you said there's room for all sorts of videogame programming. So how come we've not seen it before?

DD: Because commissioning editors don't play videogames.

But you'd think they'd at least be aware of the potential advertising revenue.

DD: Well, there are a lot of videogame shows. There's... Gamezville... that's it, really, isn't it? But without being funny, it doesn't help that Gamezville... is... utterly appalling. If you're a television maker and you look at that, you think: 'That's a videogame show? I don't want anything to do with that. What's the point of it?' As a piece of television it's appalling – it's like Dexter Fletcher's worst GamesMaster ever. It's such a backwards step. So they don't think it's going to be interesting to watch on television because the only way it's been represented is by stuff like Gamezville, and Bad Influence, and Bits, which is just pish.

I think if they started to see things which were actually good bits of television that happened to feature games, then there'd be more games TV shows. There's no reason why there can't be a television chart show based on videogames; I mean, I don't know *why* there isn't a Late Review-style show about videogames, because Peter Molyneux can talk about games every bit as well as Tom Paulin can about books. Get Molyneux in to review videogames, add a couple of fantastic features. But it's an area that commissioning editors have no knowledge about, because they don't play.

Do you play?

DD: Oh, yeah. *Pro Evolution Soccer* is an obsession. There's my three core games – there's *Pro Evo, Tiger Woods Golf,* and *Madden. Madden* I've played since the first incarnation on the Mega Drive, and I still play it now. I've got a massive problem with fully immersive games, because I eke out an existence on the fringes of the media, which means I have like seven jobs, and I have to fly from Glasgow every week to go to Slough to do some wacky report for Richard and Judy, and then the next day I'm on Radio 5 talking about how we get the hostages out of Iraq, and then I've got to write 500 knob gags about Posh Spice for my Daily Star column. And I've got two kids.

I mean, I bought *Deus Ex 2* when it came out – I loved *Deus Ex* – and I've been



On the set of WGA, setting up a gag about a weight off the mind. (Or so we can but guess, at least)

Diamond on... Thumb Bandits

"It's difficult, because I am someone who finds the word 'fuck' very amusing. But the problem is that Iain Lee has an utter absence of charm. I want to like him, and I find some of the things he says funny, but after a while... Johnny always said this about GamesMaster, and why we're lucky that our current schedule for this is at 5pm, is that it's far more funny and clever to do innuendo at 5pm than it is to say fuck at 11pm. The reason we pulled GamesMaster was that we thought that the only way we could develop it was if we got a late-night slot, but I think if we'd have got that slot, as Johnny suspected, it would have killed us, because I'd have been going fuck-shit-cunt-knob, and it wouldn't have been funny. But Iain Lee is a strange, charmless... He has no warmth, and no charm, and everything he makes jokes about is an attack on things. There's something of the bully in him."



Diamond on... EyeToy

"There is always a problem with any game that you look like a twat playing. I would feel less embarrassed if my missus walked in to find me masturbating over bukkake porn than if she saw me playing the EyeToy. It's like *Dancing Stage Megamix*, which I am fucking brilliant at, and I do in the comfort of my own little secret room. I've got my little mat, and I'm quite astonishing, but I look like Riverdance done by Steven Hawking."



Diamond on... MMORPGs

"It's not anything I have any experience in, because the time you've got to commit is gargantuan and vast. I think when online *Pro Evo* comes in, that's when I'll get into it. I like the *Quake* games and everything, but I don't want to go on and get my ass kicked by someone 100-billion times better. It's very intimidating, and they are like the bullies in school. As far as a pithy quote goes... It'd be very easy for me to say that there is nothing sadder than sitting on your own in a room 'til the wee small hours, as part of some virtual community playing a game, but I know that in a couple of months I'll be there with *Pro Evo*."

Diamond on... Trigger Happy

"I think I might have been on it. Was I on it? Yeah, I was! It was a very dull interview. I've got it on tape at home and never watched it. Sounded like it was quite intelligent, though."

terrified to turn it on, because it'd be like sitting in the room with a big bag of crack. The other night I came back, just after we'd been filming Head to Head, which is the most phenomenal part of the show, and it was a really hard week. I started playing *Deus Ex 2*, and it was four hours, BANG. As a mid-30s parent of two kids, it's terrifying to see that amount of time sucked out. You just can't do it. I find it very difficult not to get involved with things like that, like *Medal Of Honor*; the *Rising Sun* one, as well, I've had sitting around for ages; stuck it in the other night and I just get sucked right into these things.

It's interesting, when we were doing GamesMaster people would always talk about interactive movies, and they'd think it'd involve VR helmets and all that. And it doesn't – the *Medal Of Honor* games are utterly interactive movies, but I don't have the time, and it's terrifying. Whereas the great thing about *Pro Evo* – less so Madden, because it takes about an hour a game – is that you can sit down for half an hour and play it. Also, because I spend a lot of time on planes, most of my gaming is Game Boy Advance based. The Sonic games are absolutely fantastic, nice and quick. *Mario Golf*, I've been playing the latest one of that – it's pretty... pish.

JF: And you play with [your daughter] Molly, right?

DD: Oh! Yeah, recently I got *Shrek 2*, because she likes Shrek, and I played through the whole of *Shrek 2* with her in cooperative mode. And along with taking her to Celtic Park for the first time, and taking her to McFly for her first gig, it was one of the most phenomenal bonding experiences I've done with my daughter. Just absolutely terrific. Such fun. We played it solidly for about three weeks after school. That was great. I wish there were more games like that.

JF: But you wouldn't buy her a new one until she'd got 100 per cent.

DD: [Laughs] Yeah, I'm quite anal about that, because she'd completed it with 82 per cent, and she was like: "We've finished, can we get a new game, can we get *Spongebob Squarepants*?" and I was like: "No. We've got to go back to the beginning, and get all the little coins, and all the little shrunken bean things. It's a very valuable lesson in life – you can't just rush through everything." And so we went back and started playing it and I was just like, oh, god, this is really boring, because I don't like getting 100 per cent in things. Funnily enough, I spoke to Kirk – Kirk Ewing, one of my co-commentators on GamesMaster and my pal – and he was like: "You can't do that with kids! You can't make them go back and get 100 per cent when they're six years old!"

GamesMaster appealed to adolescent boys, with knob jokes and so on complementing the subject matter. When Games Attack seems to be chasing the same demographic. Will games ever escape that teenage, comic-con niche, or are they doomed to that forever?

DD: Why is it 'doomed'? Why?

Some people would argue that games have the capacity to be broader.

JF: Well, I don't think it's a niche. It's a huge industry. And I'm not sure... We're, us

"We'll carry on playing. When I'm in an old people's home, I hope my fingers work 'cause I'll have fuck all else to do"

and you, we aren't in the industry of selling boxes. So why do we care? Do girls have some kind of obligation to play? Is it the case that men can't have interest that women don't share? I believe in equality with differences – we're equal in terms of rights and what we can expect in the world, but I don't think that men are the same as women, so it doesn't surprise me that men like things women don't.

What about older people?

JF: I'm 41. We're gonna carry on playing games. I seriously think 'When I'm in an old people's home, I bloody hope my fingers work 'cause I'll have fuck all else to do'.

They won't, because you'll have been playing games for 50 years.

DD: Yeah, RSI... But it's also like, I'm a massive comics fan. I like the idea that it's not massively mainstream, because the day

they start writing comics for 22-year-old posh rugby-playing morons is the day the whole culture dies. The fact is that people who read comics, well, I find them more intelligent than those who don't, and the same with videogames. So why cater to people who aren't interested? It's a massive market anyway, so let's not taint it by dumbing down for fuckwits.

JF: Let's not crave legitimacy.

DD: The problem is, well, I went through this with GamesMaster. It's frustrating when you're doing a show that as far as entertainment value and comedy goes, it's better – well, Jonathan Ross, we kicked his

"Jonathan Ross, we kicked his fucking arse ratings-wise, but never got the credit because it was about games"

fucking arse ratings-wise, but never got the credit because it was about games. I think there's a problem with the games industry, that people creating games, people writing about games, people don't look at them in the same way as people who write for Empire magazine, or a game's not viewed as a legitimate piece of art in the same way that, y'know, a novel is. The fact that David Baddiel can write some shit by-the-numbers novel and get praise for it, and the fact that the guys who are behind *Pro Evolution* – which is as great a work art as I've seen ever, done by Caravaggio – are not hailed in the same way. I think that sometimes you've got to say, "Fuck it. Who cares?"

When Games Attack begins on Bravo on November 15, and runs for 20 weeks



Working with furry glove puppets: possibly more rewarding than having Dave 'QVC' Perry as your sidekick

Diamond on... Gamezville

"I have more respect for suicide bombers than I do for the people who are involved with making Gamezville. I think it is just... It's not just car crash TV, it's a motorway pile-up involving a busload of nuns and a truckload of orphans. I just think... Fucking hell, oh, words cannot express. It's like Dexter. What's happened is someone's said, 'Oh, what can we do, ooh, GamesMaster was good, shall we get a tape of that?' and unfortunately they've given them series three. Dexter.

"It's all fucking 'Yo, mate...' I mean, these guys can't even speak fucking English. And that's not a racist thing, they're just fucking morons. Ugh."

Ffinch: "I think the real crime is they're probably not as stupid as they're pretending to be. The real crime is that they're acting all street because they think that's cool."

Diamond: "If they're not as stupid as they're pretending to be then they're *fucking* smart. We're talking fucking Professor X. It's just so... chav. When I think about the effort we made on GamesMaster, with location and things like that, and what they've done is pissed on the grave of all of that. I mean, how dare they have challenges, and have them on two fucking school desks? And also, never, ever, ever, ever ask a kid what they think about a game on TV. Who gives a fucking toss?! 'Ooh, what's that game, is it wicked?' 'Yeah, it's wicked...' FUCK OFF. I don't give a toss what some 11-year-old kid thinks. Don't ever ask kids what they think about games. We did that on the first series of GamesMaster. They know nothing."

Ffinch on... Bits

"I think Bits was probably the best..."

Diamond: "I just found the gags, they made me vomit, they were so cringe-inducing. Getting Emily Booth was a smart idea, because she gave people something to wank over. That's what Bits was. Just an attempt to get people wanking."



Ffinch on Game Stars Live

"Embarrassing, really. I find the more you try and make something serious, the more you seem scared by your content, scared of having fun, and you try and build it up into some giant great big clash that you're never actually going to spend much time covering, because when you do cover it it doesn't look that great... I thought it could be better."

Diamond on... VR

"Whatever happened to virtual reality? At one point it was gonna take over... There's always gonna be a problem with something that fucks up your hair, and the whole problem with VR is they had that thing. That's why I've never taken to riding a motorbike – anything where you have to wear a large helmet. It's also why I've never been an astronaut. Very few people have the kind of hair that can survive a helmet. I don't, I've been follically challenged from an early age, and I have to comb my hair in a highly tactical manner. That's why anything that can mess it up just isn't worth it.

"Plus, it was just too oblong, wasn't it? They never managed to make that move out of the oblong things, into the real world. They never managed to do the porn application that sells everything. There are about five-gazillion soft porn films about virtual reality, but they never managed to get that cock-based interface. It would have flown off the shelves."

Diamond on... videogame magazines

"I'm appalled by the lack of writing and intelligence in games magazines in general. I think the more massmarket the machine, the worse the writing. When you get the likes of official console magazines... they've always got fantastic covers, and they've got stuff on the CD, and you think 'Oh great!' and you go to buy them, and then they've got that plastic bag. The plastic bag was the most fantastic marketing invention as far as games magazines go, because you thought 'Fucking hell, there must be something brilliant in there, because they've wrapped it in a plastic bag!' Then you open it and it's just screenshot, screenshot, screenshot, screenshot, and then you come to the review and it's just a rewording of the instruction manual.

"Obviously **Edge** has always been very intelligent, far too intelligent for me to enjoy, but PC Zone has always been my benchmark for it. I've always said that the writing there's as good as the writing in Private Eye. McDonald, Brooker, McCandless – it shows, the fact that Brooker's Screen Burn in the Guardian is the funniest thing in newspapers today. But by and large, and console mags in particular because they tend to be written by younger people, they're written by morons, for morons."



Diamond on... Dave Perry

"If Dave's happy, then good luck to him. Kirk Ewing and I logged on to the Games Animal website, because we'd heard that he'd mentioned When Games Attack. So we went on as two different people [and wreaked havoc]... But the sad thing was, Dave wrote an email to Kirk saying [adopts soft voice], 'Oh, I was really pleased that you and Dom were on the site, and if you want to join up...' and I just thought, well, Dave's created this little world, and if he's happy, good luck to him. I've gone past feeling angry at his attempts to rewrite GamesMaster history in a shockingly inaccurate fashion to feeling intensely sorry for the guy. If that's what makes him happy, with his little fucking pictures of Dani Behr, then he's not harming anyone. Let's just let him be. I mean, as you get older, you realise that to live inside that head is not a nice thing. And I just feel nothing but intense sadness. I dunno. I mean, has he done well? I think he's sucking old men's cocks for pennies, myself. Is he married? He works hard. He works hard. And if he's happy... He really has so little to do with my life. I suspect I probably have far more to do with his."

Diamond on... comic innuendo

"It's one of the founding tenets of comedy, what we've given to the world. It's just wordplay, it started with Shakespeare, with Chaucer in fact – it's always existed in the English language. 'Waggling your joystick' was just lame, looking back, but there were other times in GamesMaster when we spoke about the oil rig, and the salty spray splashing in my face, and I was just... that's one of the things I've written in my life that I'm most proud of. The way it works is the sicker the real thing is, the better it is, and there was a lot of stuff on GamesMaster about emissions that we managed to get through. I think it's very intelligent – it's like someone telling you a joke in a foreign language, because if you get it you feel enriched, rewarded."

Diamond on... 'the intellectualisation of videogaming'

"[Sighs] Well, if it gives you a chubby. It's like the intellectualisation of football, through Nick Hornby. I think some of these things are designed to make people feel less guilty about enjoying things, but the fact is... Well, Nick Hornby can write what he likes about football, but the fact is that the greatest football player in the world, Wayne Rooney, has only basic motor neurone functions, and can't even read a traffic sign. I get very scared when people try to intellectualise things, but I think that's because I don't think I'm a particularly intelligent person. [Pauses] I write for The Star."

Ffinch on... GamePad

"I think GamePad was often poorly scheduled, so it was often reviewing games that had been out for ages. I think it was quite lazy; a lot of the time they'd just show pretty unmediated footage – a long swathe of an intro sequence. It seemed like not a lot of work went into it."

Diamond: "I think it's the biggest media ripoff since the Sex Pistols. I think it was 'slam an EPK [electronic press kit] in, have some fucking lame voiceover, make no attempt at humour'. It's like, fucking hell, put some alliteration in there, say something of intellect, something amusing. It was Violet standing there, fucking lazy EPKs, utterly uninspiring. I think Johnny's right, lazy is the word, and they got away with it for a long time, so fucking well done to them."

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Dishonour among thieves

Can peer pressure stop piracy?



Halo 2: out there now, if you want it. But what about that special smell of fresh instruction manual?

A few hours into the leak, the conspiracy-theory race was fast becoming as compelling a game as *Halo 2* itself ought to be. "It's a real leak!" "No, it's not, the file is fake!" "No, it's real but it'll crash and then corrupt your hard drive!" "No, it won't, that was a lie Microsoft came up with in a panic to stop people downloading it!" "But it was Microsoft that leaked it in the first place, as a publicity stunt!" "No, they didn't, it was the French! It was definitely the French!" What, all of them?

The feeding frenzy makes Bungie's 'I love bees' viral marketing campaign all the more apt: *Halo 2* is one of the biggest honeypots of all time, and it's little surprise that so many inquisitive gamers have flocked to the news that the lid's been left ajar. The debate will rage about how much harm it's doing ("None! I'll still buy the game on release!" versus "All piracy is theft!"), but it's hard to construct an argument that says it's a good thing. If the leak proves stable, then Microsoft will lose sales and Bungie's endless efforts to protect the details of the singleplayer story will be spiked by every gaming site on the internet. Even if it were a publicity stunt, it would be a misguided one, making the industry look incompetent and criminalised. Whatever your stance on leaks, they're going to continue. *Halo 2*'s leak shows that technical arms races, legal judgments and quarantined review code can't stop them. You can.

In a peer-to-peer world, the old excuse of trying before buying is no longer a water-tight defence. No matter how pure your intentions are of buying the product you've downloaded, you can't police the actions of those who pirate it from you. There's no distinction between a user and a supplier any more, no moral cracks to hide in. But equally, in a peer-to-peer world, you can oppose piracy without lifting a finger – by literally not lifting a finger. Don't click on the download link, and you strangle the supply by one tiny degree. And then let the debate rage about how much good that can do, secure in the knowledge of how impossible it is to construct an argument that says it's a bad thing.

Choice incoming cuts

The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap



A stolen hour with Link and his talking hat reveals that Capcom still has the sound understanding, deft touch and devilish imagination needed for a great *Zelda* game.
GBA (NINTENDO)

New Ridge Racer



So it was *old* Ridge Racer – an *RRV* track given a widescreen makeover – but its unfinished state let the handling shine through. With almost nothing there save the powerslides, it was still enough.
PSP (NAMCO)

Rise Of The Kasai



The methodical brutality of Rau's first outing was a lesson in patience that stood alone in a genre of lithe, supersonic acrobats. But that hasn't made the wait for his return, fall, and his sister's vengeance easier.
PS2 (SONY)

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E145, E138**

Resident Evil 4

Capcom squares up to one of the most terrifying challenges facing survival horror – handing control back to the player







Blood bank

Curiously, money can now be picked up, from inside smashed boxes and from the corpses of fallen enemies, meaning that *Resident Evil* now has an economy, too. Items and weapon upgrades can be bought, while dirty items can be cleaned to increase their resale value. This introduction of currency also means that more effective play – conserving ammo, exploring and culling the maximum number of enemies – is rewarded. It makes a pleasant change from the typical speed-runs and playing-without-saving that the *RE* games usually take as a measure of skill and achievement.

It must be scary for Shinji Mikami, director of *Resident Evil 4*, perhaps scarier than any of his past *Resident Evil* games have ever managed to be. Back in 1996, the first *Resident Evil* coined the survival-horror genre and, in the eyes of many, defined it. It's a genre that has steadfastly relied on a prerendered premise – pristine but static environments, fixed camera angles and clumsy, sticky controls to unease the player as much as any amount of splatter horror and audio-visual atmosphere.

The series has seen prequels, side-stories and updates that, while gaining a mixed reception among established fans, refused to step far enough away from the formula to enrapture a new audience. It's almost as if *Resident Evil* has become hesitant to face up to the necessary evil of change, paralysed by the knowledge that ironing out any of the problems of the sore, stuttered action will take it beyond the established boundaries of survival horror and into the well-trodden territory of thirdperson action, with the added challenge of having to scare a player who's no longer bolted into a ghost train of preconceived, on-rails thrills and is now free to trample all over any sense of dramatic tension. But it's a challenge that *Resident Evil 4* is meeting head on, and successfully so, with not a hint of identity crisis in sight.

The camera is now fixed in an effective tracking manner, positioned snugly behind the lead character's right shoulder, essentially giving the player freedom to look wherever they want, whenever they want. Twin-stick control isn't fully implemented, however, as the right stick allows lead character Leon Kennedy to flick his view upwards or down at the ground but nothing more. Aiming your weapon is a similarly gummy mix of conditional restriction; holding the R-trigger puts you into a free-look mode, firing your laser-sighted pistol wherever, but prevents your character from moving. This may seem like a half-hearted progression next to the twin-stick grace of a more typical thirdperson shooter but, in practice, these compromises come across as more of a happy medium between fluid play and the sensation of danger that comes from being so hampered, but without making the player feel like they're fighting an undead control system as much as a relentless, deadly enemy. A quick-turn function is also available, activated by holding back on the stick while pressing the run button. This newfound freedom to aim precisely is made all the more affecting and powerful thanks to enemies, such as the villagers of the opening section, who respond acutely to being shot, reeling and staggering and clutching desperately at their opened throats. Lining up headshots on a downed and temporarily static enemy is as much a priority as taking potshots at whatever pitchfork-wielding housewife has just managed to get within eye-stabbing range of Leon. These villagers are a magnificently creepy mix of human and inhuman, not so much the walking dead as



Boxes can be smashed open to reveal supplies and ammo, but it's an oversight that you can't just crack them with the butt of your handgun, say, instead having to waste a bullet or switch to a short-range melee weapon

> **You can shoot any projectiles out of the air, or put a bullet in someone's hand to disarm them, such is the scope of combat, making gunplay considered target practice**



You've now access to a set of binoculars; it's almost guilty voyeurism for a game series that until now has always forced the player to watch the action from a series of cramped, predetermined angles



Very early on in the game, you'll stumble across a dog with its leg caught in a bear trap; shooting the trap will free it, with the dog bounding away. It's a move that's mooted to help out the player later in the game, with the dog rumoured to be a kind of sidekick



the strafing dead and the jogging dead. They approach cautiously but inevitably, moving with more intelligence than the singular, strength-in-numbers conga-line tactic expected of zombie hordes, throwing whatever comes to hand and fanning out slightly in order to get an optimal chance of hacking a chunk out of your face. Fortunately, you can always simply shoot any projectiles out of the air, or put a bullet in someone's hand to disarm them, such is the scope of the combat system. This all makes the gunplay feel more like considered target practice instead of an out-and-out shooting range.

The opening stage, set in a pastoral but nonetheless unsettling village, sets an excellent tone for the game, dropping the player off into a set-piece through which they have to carve their own path – shooting out windows and climbing on to rooftops, all the while being pursued by an enemy capable of clambering up behind you and firebombing you out of any cubby-hole you try to dig yourself into – instead of being shepherded from one tight corridor to the next. Later stages keep up the feeling of an organic world, both in terms of possible courses of action and imminent threat. The docks, for example, feature a number of walkways which provide little respite, considering that enemies will happily wade through waist-high water to claw at you from all directions. Caves are filled with oil lamps that can be shot out to provide an explosion – and they may also reveal an item you just couldn't see before in the glare.

Other changes point to a more



Grenades prove to be as practical to use as they are potent. The shotgun makes a triumphant return, too, in what is possibly its most shockingly effective videogame form yet, punching a bloody path through screens thick with enemies

accessible, useful system of play. Your energy bar is now displayed on-screen, instead of being defiantly and irritatingly tucked away on a menu screen. And your inventory is more forgiving, allowing for a large number of items based on how many blocks they take up, meaning no more typical *Resident Evil* dimensional oddities where a key can take up as much of your pocket as a handgun. Maybe they're reluctant concessions, but they're warmly welcome all the same. And they, as much as anything else, point to the fact that *Resident Evil 4* is, as scary as it sounds, definitely on track to prove the old maxim about a change being as good as a rest.





If a number of enemies get a little too close for comfort, Leon can let loose with a spinning kick that sends them all tumbling, giving him some breathing space to escape

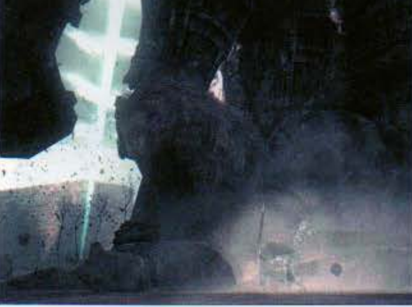


FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SCEI)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E142**

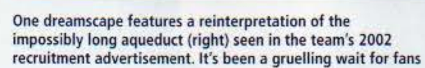
Ico 2

Back in the saddle for a closer look at perhaps the most visually arresting PS2 game ever conceived



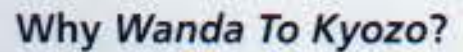






One dreamscape features a reinterpretation of the impossibly long aqueduct (right) seen in the team's 2002 recruitment advertisement. It's been a gruelling wait for fans

We'd already given a cover story to the next *Ico* game (a moniker SCEE is keen to maintain for the western release, rather than the literal translation of its native *Wanda To Kyozo*), but it would have been impolite to pass up another opportunity to speak with **Fumito Ueda** and (an introspectively quiet) **Kenji Kaido**. Not just impolite, but impossible: as much as the game's fabulous mystery deserves to be unspoiled by forewarning, it's that same mystery – those towering creatures of pelt and sinew and ancient stone – that leaves us so insatiably curious.



Why *Wanda To Kyozo*?

Wanda is the name of the hero. Kyozo would mean Colossus in English. So the game title [translated] is *Wanda And Colossus*. I thought *Ico* was perhaps too abstract, so this time I wanted something simpler, easier to understand. Now, from a Japanese perspective, I think it is more appealing, in addition to being easier to understand. It shocks people's ears.



How do you intend to let the new game's storyline unfold?

I can't explain the scenario in detail, but it is about a young man who brings a girl who has lost her soul to a long-forgotten place, where it is said she can regain her soul. He is guided by a sort of divine voice, which explains to him that he must awaken the colossi and defeat all of them to succeed. We are designing a strange language, different from *Ico's*, to keep this mythical feeling about the game's world. There will be subtitles to understand the dialogue. Some questions we will not provide any answers to, even at the end of the game, like *Ico*. For example, you will have no explanation about why the girl lost her soul. We want players to imagine the reason behind some elements of the story. But you will learn about the nature of the colossus and their place in that world at the end.

> "The situation changes, so progression on his enemy's body will be hard for the hero. Hairs offer the best grip but other surfaces can be slippery, or even offer no grip"

Though you don't intend the game to be a continuation of *Ico*, it does echo the visual style. Did you at any point consider starting over with a completely new visual approach?

We researched various styles, but nothing actually satisfied us. Our choice to deliver something close to *Ico* was motivated by the fact that it is still today very original and could be developed in another way. *Ico* was filled with light, but *Wanda* is more terrestrial – closer to earth.



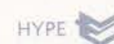
This impressive phenomenon is perhaps a less subtle means of communication from the 'divine voice' overseeing Wanda's quest, though the colossi are hardly inconspicuous beasts

Have you determined how many the player will encounter during the game?

At the moment we have around 20, in various forms. Some are bipeds while others fly, live in water, and so on. According to our designs, the game should last for an average of ten hours. But this time we want to provide enough bonuses to motivate players to play it several times, much more than *Ico*.

Can you explain how Wanda works in concert with his horse?

His horse, Argo, is a very important partner. Since colossi come in various shapes, he will need his horse's speed and mobility to study his opponent's movements or even just catch up with it. There are many actions both 'characters' can perform together: the hero





The colossi amaze not just with their scale, but in their recollection of the rigorous architecture of *Ico*'s castle, as if it had risen from its haunches and marched inland





can stand on his horse's back and jump, for instance. We are particularly proud of the horse animation.

I think the animation of the character is worth attention, too – he can perform an incredible variety of movements according to his situation.

Is that entirely situation-based, or will he learn new skills, or the ability to use new equipment over the course of the game's duration?

It is not a roleplaying game, so he will not have an inventory or new equipment to acquire. However, he will gain some kind of experience, improving his parameters. I can't talk definitively on this yet, but he may actually change slightly in appearance in some way, due to these improvements.



On falling: "What will happen depends on the altitude, but most of the time he will be hurt – you will see in the way he impacts on the ground. After he falls several times, he will be wounded and find it difficult to move"

Considering some players found the combat in *Ico* too difficult, is there a concern that the concept of scaling a colossus may be too overwhelming, or even frustrating?

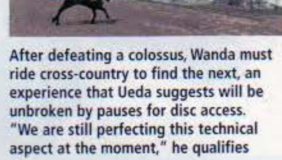
We are testing this key feature of the game, and I believe we have found the right balance so it will not be that difficult, letting the player focus on understanding each colossus' body's configuration and nature. Of course, you will fall many times as you challenge the enemy's body. But when you get a good knowledge of its configuration and especially the locations of its weaknesses, then you will go for it. I think the first exploration is challenging, but it will not be a barrier for the game experience.

That's what we're working to achieve, and when we perfect it, I think the game will be successful.

What would you say your greatest achievement is with the game so far?

It is definitely the way we managed to animate the surface on the colossus' body. As it moves, like any living being, its hide distorts and extends. This represents one of the game's main challenges for the player – it is like the levels are constantly evolving. The situation is always changing, so progression on his enemy's body will be hard for the hero. Hairs offer the best grip but other surfaces can be slippery, or even offer no grip. In addition, there are obstacles, these sort of 'accessories' the colossus wears.





After defeating a colossus, Wanda must ride cross-country to find the next, an experience that Ueda suggests will be unbroken by pauses for disc access. "We are still perfecting this technical aspect at the moment," he qualifies

And, finally, the colossus will not let the hero climb freely on its body – it will try to dislodge him, adding to the stage's difficulty. Now, you may have a very active colossus so the game will be very much action-oriented. Others may be more peaceful, but just moving around the body will require a lot of thinking. This tactical aspect is not just limited to the body configuration: the environment is another key component. Its shape provides access points to certain forms of colossus. Higher ground combined with the use of the horse will give a jumping point to catch a flying colossus. Bringing another colossus to a certain location might limit its mobility. We are thinking about this kind of uses of the environment to amplify the importance of the horse, and also provide more depth to the game. But the body animation and the vast landscapes are the biggest challenges we are facing in development right now.



Director Fumito Ueda and producer Kenji Kaido at the Manhattan Hotel during TGS



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI UNIVERSAL (US), TBC (UK)**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (US), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E137**

The Bard's Tale

Sharp swords, sharper tongues, damsels in distress and the voice of Cary Elwes – the western RPG gets the Princess Bride treatment

Conversation branches offer the choice of a sarcastic or, well, cheerfully sarcastic response. The delight, apart from the wordplay, is in the unexpected consequences

The remake is a tricky business, considering that so much of what builds a game's mythology is an entirely personal reaction: endless budget and development talent can't re-imagine a player's imagination. This second life for *The Bard's Tale* concerns itself with the fact that players *enjoyed* playing the original – a game that is, amusingly, now older than a sizeable chunk of the people who play on current gaming consoles – and sets out to make players enjoy it again.

That it recounts a new story isn't the surprise so much as how the telling's changed – if the 1985 game was read in a monotone from a D&D rulebook, the 2004 game is recounted with folksy, wry insight from that same rulebook, now annotated with 20 years of observations, anecdotes and strike-throughs. It's a light-hearted outlook backed up by one of the most convincing efforts yet to balance both sides of the action-RPG label. For all that's changed, there's one aspect that rings familiar from its heritage: the difficulty. Venture into a new area and the map seethes with angry red markers; come across a save point and it's as likely a grim omen of imminent ambush as a convenience. Charging into the fray with the expectation that you can stab down foes as quickly as you can stab the attack button soon reveals that even a single enemy can block and counterattack with murderous speed, and in numbers they're overwhelming. The Bard's own ability to block lasts only for the crucial moment of impact, so there's no hunkering down to deflect all comers.

Instead, *The Bard's Tale* asks you to relearn those old rules of picking your openings, choosing your ground and managing your party (even when initially that party will consist of a crawling bolt of electricity and a small but enthusiastic dog), but this time without the safety net of a turn-based environment. Barking orders at your companions with the D-pad allows you to set up ambushes, valiant stands and less-valiant retreats as the situation requires. As your set-list of summoning songs grows, so do the possibilities for combat, with each would-be party member bringing its own talent: the Thunder Spider can shock enemies senseless, the Heroine's crossbow can batter them back in their tracks, the Mercenary can make leering advances at passing townswomen.

Not to be outdone, the Bard also gains regular choices of combat specialisation with

Beer beer beer tiddly beer beer beer. A long time ago, way back in history, when all there was to drink

The forgotten art of RPG singalongs – come back *Alternate Reality*, all is forgiven – is reprised with *The Bard's Tale*'s musical moments. They're not profound, but they are catchy





Potions and scrolls are for teetotallers: *The Bard's Tale* offers stat-boosting liquors. They must be imbibed on the premises, ensuring your travels accommodate regular pub crawls





Your companions' icons indicate their health level. Unlike the Bard, they do not naturally recover, so it's often easiest to dismiss and resummon them in the lull between battles – if there is a lull. Attempting to summon in a fight is risky at best

his levelling, providing a sense even early in the game that his skills are slowly catching up with his inflated self-image. And the decision to forego an inventory – equipment is either immediately useful or money in the Bard's purse – simplifies rather than trivialises the issue of ensuring his gear passes muster.

But with even the best-laid battle plans occasionally prone to disaster, combat may seem too sadistically reminiscent of hours spent reloading from 5.25-inch floppies or, as a more recent point of reference, that first boss fight of *Ninja Gaiden*. As with both examples, though, there's a reason to press on, and it's that *The Bard's Tale* shows every sign of being a smart, involving RPG. That couldn't be taken for granted: a game that thumbs its nose at its own genre has more to risk than failing to raise a knowing smile.

There are no shortages of knowing smiles, but they're the product of an obvious care for the RPG as much as from exasperation with its neurotic adherence to cliché. It's the same care that's been lavished on the art design, with personable character models and a vividly lush wilderness. And it's the same care that finds subtitles switched off by default to let the voice acting tell the story – even if some accents drift through the Hebrides to unknown destinations during the course of a conversation. This overall solidity keeps the moments of unadulterated absurdist humour from jarring, and alternately doesn't leave you waiting for a punchline when the darker overarching storyline makes its presence felt.

The seeming contradictions don't stop there: although it's narrating an inevitable story from foreshadowed end to beginning to end again, you can sense the path branching with each encounter. It keeps its self-described 'Olde School' sensibilities close

InXile wanted to make a game with personality – and it's as ambiguous, eccentric and brashly confident a personality as you could hope for

(allowing access to an area far in advance of your ability to survive it seems a nod to players who would attempt *Wasteland*'s high-level Citadel as early as possible), yet shows a real appreciation of how times, and games, have changed. It's fun without the jokes, but the jokes make the game fun.

Perhaps the explanation is in the design brief. InXile wanted to make a game with personality – and it's as ambiguous, eccentric and brashly confident a personality as you could hope for. For those who prefer their entertainment to keep its thoughts to itself, this could be *The Bard's Tale*'s undoing. For others, though, it looks set to be the life of the adventuring party.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 1**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

Devil May Cry 3

Last year, it seemed the only developer unable to imitate Devil May Cry was Capcom. But third time's the charm





The early enemies – chiefly three breeds of mummified reapers – feature neat incidental detail, with billowing capes to rival Dante's overcoat. They're also noticeably smarter than previous thugs



DMC3 is the kind of action game that would pause to preen itself in front of a mirror during a gunfight: in fact, it wouldn't be surprising to catch the game's young and hungry Dante doing just that as he whoops and pouts his way through his debut devil-hunting performance. There's a winning lack of self-consciousness to its style – or 'stylish crazy action', to use the proper invented term – careening as it does between camp, cheese and music-video cool with machinegun rapidity.

An apparent unspoken rule of *DMC3* previews is to open with a scathing dismissal of the rushed second title – but it's obvious that the new game owes much to Tsuyoshi Tanaka's (unfulfilled) vision for *DMC2*, playing up environmental gymnastics and contortionist gunplay. Where *DMC2* stumbled with languid level design and hesitant enemies, though, *DMC3*'s opening moments share the boisterous confidence of their hero: a brawl inside a Renaissance-décor pole-dancing club proves as endlessly replayable as the original game's encounter with the Blades outside the coliseum.

And yet the revelation is the way the game's fighting styles supplement rather than replace Dante's familiar moveset, which remains constantly available. Thus players able to reel off Stinger-to-High-Time combos on muscle memory alone can dedicate their circle button to Trickster speed dashes and wall runs (though triggering the latter can be awkward). Swordmaster, meanwhile, is almost a misnomer, as in addition to rapid blade attacks it reprises the ability of *DMC2*'s secret character to toss your sword into an unfortunate foe and fight fist and boot until retrieving it. It's Gunslinger that convincingly steals the show, though, with immediately accessible, wildly showy dual aiming and a whipcracking shotgun special attack as iconic as the first title's pistol juggle.



In a departure for the series, *DMC3*'s camera is notably well-behaved, and tweakable with the right analogue stick



Volatile enemies and, better yet, barrels feature in the city streets. The resulting inferno is the only point that *DMC3*'s engine is forced to catch its breath and drop a frame or two

Still absent is the Royal Guard unarmed combat style, rendered even more tantalising by the presence of *Street Fighter 3* and *Alpha*'s Kenji Itsuno as game director – Guardsman Dante is said to throw what looks suspiciously like a dragon punch. With Swordmaster and Gunslinger styles intended to adapt to each new weapon, and presumably more style-agnostic upgrades in store, the combat system could hardly be more promising. The question, as always, is whether the game can continue as it has so convincingly begun – and though it's hardly a series for the quiet approach, Capcom has remained coy on practically every aspect.

But the reassuringly lengthy development time – even the recent delay has been a backhanded relief – suggests the wait is best spent guessing who of Dante's shock-haired, katana-wielding brother Vergil or the game's nameless femme fatale will guest as unlockable characters. There's one question that can at least be answered: whether Dante can still hold his own in a genre that has taken so many evolutionary leaps since his arrival. On current form, it seems his 15 bullets of fame are far from up.





The style meter now indicates how long you can afford to be uncool before dropping down a rank. Achieving S-rank swank requires Dante's full repertoire: in *DMC3*'s style book, repeating the same attack is *so* two games ago





Attacking one of the hubworld's inhabitants often results in a minor spat, but nothing more. Attacking passers-by then retreating often results in them turning on each other

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**



All you can cheat

Jak 3's secrets menu has a number of upgrades and modes to toggle that aren't limited to stock, throwaway cheats (such as big/little-head mode and the like). By collecting enough secret orbs, vehicle and weapon upgrades can be purchased, but only once the game has 'revealed' the bonuses on the menu. Most interesting, however, is an Expert Options section, which promises to contain the kind of functions that can change the whole game for anyone dedicated enough to unearth them. Will there be anything to match _Ratchet & Clank 2_'s firstperson mode?

Jak 3

A slight change of tack for Jak, the renegade without a subtitle

While the *Ratchet & Clank* series has sat firm and comfy in its pump-action, gun-heavy groove, *Jak II* saw Naughty Dog's hero go anti-hero, shifting slightly awkwardly in his patchwork platforming framework and borrowing a little something from everything in order to please some of the people all of the time. The shooting, the hoverboard, the darker tone, the expansive hubworld masquerading as a bustling city; they're all back, along with a further handful of borrowed ideas integrated into the mix with Jak's typical load-free grace.

There's a desert surrounding the Nomadic main city. It's a big part of what's new, allowing players to drive a pleasingly weighty series of buggies around the impressively wide and wobbly area. With Jak virtually always coming under fire from marauders during these sections as he retrieves artifacts and stranded citizens, there's more than a touch of *Smuggler's Run* to this new facet. Initial missions require nothing but skilful navigation of the terrain, but you'll soon be driving buggies with hood-mounted cannons, and taking out enemies will often leave behind blobs of useful speed boost. The hub itself is far less problematic than that of *Jak II*. Fleet-footed Leapers allow Jak to explore it at speed, and harming any of the inhabitants will lead to a fight with the upset citizen, but nothing more.

It's a game with typically immense production, packing in the award-worthy cut-scenes and panoramic environments that have marked the series out as, at least, a technical achievement. But there are concerns, and they feel like old wounds for a game series built on a luxuriously produced series of derivative sections, more than any strength of ideas. The first two hours of play feature a neat rhythm-action code-breaking minigame, a number of races (which will often require numerous tries, as they require the player to finish first), and multiple collection quests that, while not flawed, do leave a bland taste in the mouth. Finding six lizards, rescuing four stranded workers, killing four metalheads, retrieving ten packages: these are quests given bulk by repetition and not creativity, made bearable by the accomplished looks and unfaltering controls on offer.

Still, there's plenty of scope for the game to unfold into something far less generic than the accessible, everyman tutorial trudge with which games – especially action/platforming hybrids – typically introduce themselves these days. If it doesn't, we'll be left with another Jak of all trades, and a master of none.



Dotted around the game are bonus statues that, in return for a few dark eco crystals, will offer you the chance to earn a secret orb (see 'All you can cheat') by leaping through a series of hoops (literally) or sprinting to a location in record time





There's an impressive showroom of beach buggies on display when you first head out into the desert, but you won't be let loose in some of the more formidable models until you've proved yourself worthy of them

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (KCEJ)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Metal Gear Acid

The portable Solid Snake addresses the PSP's dearth of card battles, strategy and philosophical ramblings in one fell swoop







It wouldn't be a *Metal Gear* without protracted talking heads sequences, and *Acid* doesn't – or perhaps does – disappoint in this respect. Harried showgoers were desperately button-mashing through these lengthy dialogues

Despite some fair warning that *Acid* would be a considerably slower take on *Metal Gear* than its console, and even handheld, sister titles, many TGS attendees were obviously surprised by the playable article. With a feel that's decidedly *Front Mission* – aptly so, with the producer of Konami's '60s mech combat title *Ring Of Red* overseeing the project – crossed with a trading card game, *Acid*'s action is delivered in carefully measured doses.

Snake now operates in a turn-based environment, which can be rotated to cardinal points with the shoulder buttons or freely with the analogue disc. At the beginning of each turn, the player is given a quota of action points and a hand of cards; each card features a cost to play and a movement point bonus. One card can be discarded to boost Snake's movement range, within which he can sneak, crawl or sidle along walls in familiar style.

It's the enemy turn where *Acid*'s genre switch becomes most apparent: should Snake be discovered, direct firefights prove as dangerous as ever, but with the added



The playable version's GUI was no-frills compared to the *MGS*-style overlay previously shown: the current version may be placeholder or a concession to PSP hardware

vulnerability of running out of action points to respond with. And where *MGS* players could take advantage of their freedom and the AI's limitations to escape from an unfavourable situation, *Acid*'s tight ruleset brutally levels the playing field.

Though an interesting experiment in bringing a new skew to the series, it's perhaps misplaced: the PlayStation generation has grown accustomed to Snake as an action hero, not an action figure. More patient early adopters, however, may be pleased to find an early PSP title that's more than a port of its forebears.

Rengoku: The Tower Of Purgatory

Is it the concept of a rise of the robots that has kept attention away from Hudson's grim-themed arcade-action PSP RPG?

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **HUDSON**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**



It's unclear if the tower's levels will be randomly generated – such a feature would certainly be a boon for replay in *Rengoku*'s gunslinging dungeon crawl

Hudson's first PSP title has been a dark horse throughout the machine's pre-launch hype swell, despite looking as striking (and, perhaps more significantly, as solid) now as it did in the E3 demo reel. Drawing on Dante's Divine Comedy for its theme – the coolly mechanical art design suggesting Hudson is taking the source material more seriously than, say, *Devil May Cry* – the game's protagonist is a warrior android, ADAM, who must scale the eight levels of the titular tower in search of a reason to exist.

Standing in the way of his ascent are 200 of his fellow androids, all with a far less philosophical outlook on their being. Defeating each in combat will earn new weapons, equipment and evolve ADAM's 'core', which appears to be a standard set of RPG statistics. Though ADAM cannot be killed, mortal damage will cause a 'reset', costing him his new attributes and equipment – which sounds like a fate worse than death, recalling the loss of a fully powered ship in an arcade shooter.

But in a similar fashion to that disastrous



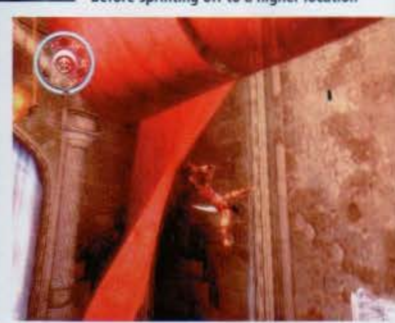
Rengoku's androids are literally armed to the teeth: weapons can be mounted in their heads, as well as on both arms (which can accept guns or blades) and a leg. Each weapon mount corresponds to a PSP face button

scenario, it may be possible to claw back ADAM's upgrades with some deft combat skills, as *Rengoku* plays much like a standard thirdperson action title – with all the dodging and weaving that entails. Combat is pleasingly responsive and rapid, so much so that Hudson intends to implement an up-to-16-player deathmatch mode. However, Sony's tardiness to provide support for the PSP's wireless functionality could result in *Rengoku* being delayed from its current 'year-end' release or, more ominously, the feature being dropped altogether.





The Prince can now abseil down curtains, allowing him to end his wall runs with a graceful slide down to the ground. They can also be used as makeshift ropes, allowing him to run back and forth along the wall in an arc before sprinting off to a higher location



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX, PC, GC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 26**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E137, E138**

Prince Of Persia: The Warrior Within

Like an acrobat outta hell, the Prince Of Persia becomes the Prince Of Darkness. But will POP's bubble burst?

The atmosphere has completely changed. *The Sands Of Time* was a literal sandcastle, a gameworld that shimmered with gold and blue, but now everything in *The Warrior Within* is infused – choked, even – with smoke and dust.

The world that the Prince scours in his desperate battle to escape death – his fated punishment for unleashing the sands of time in the original – is a gloomy and gritty one, but still remains far more striking than the usual washed-out and under-developed videogame look that such descriptions often suggest. Everything has been smudged with doom and shadow, from the towering and ruined architecture to the Prince himself. It's this shift in the Prince's demeanour that is perhaps the least welcome aspect of *Persia's* gothification: instead of the innocent, clean-spoken and charming fighter *The Sands Of Time* gave us, we're now left with a one-dimensional videogame character – a gruff-voiced action hero who spends his fights spouting aggressive soundbites, a fact cemented in your mind by the swearing and lingering arse-tracking of the game's first few cut-scenes.

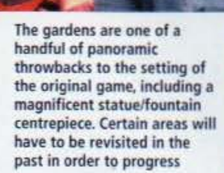
But whether or not the game's leaning towards a more generic dystopia is any less beautiful in the eye of the pad-holder, it's inarguably impressive, and still a few notches further up the property ladder than many in terms of current gameworlds. Also, there are numerous time-travelling detours into places far less dank and far more prettily lit than the architectural graveyard that initially seems to make up the game.

The Prince, perpetual snarl and all, has broadened his combat options somewhat, a necessary upgrade considering how much more prevalent battles have become. Instead of being limited to the cordoned stop-start rumbles of the original (conversely, the platforming sections now feel more staccato and less flowing by comparison), there's now a dizzying combo list that spills on for several pages in the pause menu. Moreover, the Prince can dual-wield weapons, including any of those dropped by his defeated foes, and can perform a variety of new gymnastic offensives – such as swinging around a pole with his legs or blades flailing, or slashing out during a wall run.

The Warrior Within carries upgrades, sure, but the change in tone here is probably as vital to your enjoyment as anything else. Whether the game can offer up anything as captivating as *The Sands Of Time's* Observatory, or as energising a rush of agility and confident combat as that of the original, is for the review to decide.

Assuming, of course, that not even the Prince can outrun or dodge such a fated judgement.





The gardens are one of a handful of panoramic throwbacks to the setting of the original game, including a magnificent statue/fountain centrepiece. Certain areas will have to be revisited in the past in order to progress







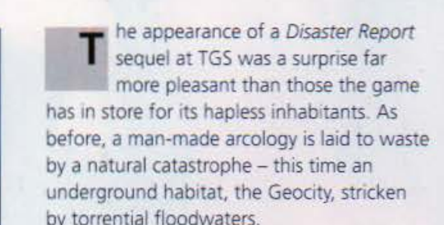
The opening boss fight is nothing more than a dull back-and-forth scene-setter, hampered as much by the camera as by your opponent's one-note attack pattern. The game's later bosses, by their very construction, do promise something a little more engaging, however

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **IREM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

Disaster Report 2

How to survive Bydo invasion, then an earthquake, now a flood: Irem continues its public service announcements

Once a character is soaked – either from being dunked in the flood or caught in the downpour – the cold sets in, making the search for a heat source a necessity



The appearance of a *Disaster Report* sequel at TGS was a surprise far more pleasant than those the game has in store for its hapless inhabitants. As before, a man-made arcology is laid to waste by a natural catastrophe – this time an underground habitat, the Geocity, stricken by torrential floodwaters.

Two characters are available at the game's outset, both working as catering staff for the Geocity's inaugural ceremony while a storm lashes against the surface-level glass ceiling. After a brief acclimatisation period of wheeling trolleys, serving drinks and watching ominous pools gather in the corridors, the water breaks loose. At first an ankle-deep swell, it rapidly builds to a structure-gouging flood, carving the environment into the precarious, teetering adventure playground that characterised the first game.

The water brings its own set of hazards: a sudden wave can knock your character head over heels, currents inexorably pull towards yawning chasms, and flood-carried debris (ranging, as the game progresses, from sofas to tanker trailers) lurches into view at the most inopportune moments. If the original's desperate search for drinking water is made an ironic memory, the new constant threat is the bitter cold, with the sight of the bedraggled survivors huddled and shivering an effective reminder of their frailty.

Featuring jump scares to rival the best survival horrors and well-paced level (re)design – especially the main concourse's transformation from plush chandelier-lit chic to murky subterranean grotto – there are more than enough positives here to forgive the familiar flaws. These include a blundering camera, slippery controls and polygon-intensive environments that can choke the framerate even before a thousand tons of water are cascading through them. Credit to the game's charm, then, that the only disaster here is entirely intentional.







Set to an incessant Christmas jingle, the game's prologue extends the calm before the storm to expertly excruciating length: then light, warmth and safety in numbers are all wrenched away in rapid succession

Kagero 2: Dark Illusion

In a dark, dark house in a dark, dark wood lies that most unpredictably monstrous of fairytale villains: you

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2004**

The first level on display finds you disposing of a young squire. Going by *Deception*'s past, his grieving family will soon investigate, with equally fatal consequences



Like *Dungeon Keeper* without the air of cheerfulness, Tecmo's *Deception* series (of which *Kagero* is an offshoot) garnered a cult following from its unusual concept: playing a mansion-bound villain who must lay a network of deathtraps to dispose of intruding do-gooders. The games' attention to the art and science of mass murder was ghoulishly addictive, but their strongest suit was a celebration of sadism that, were it not for the fantasy environment, could make *Manhunt* blanch.

Dark Illusion's lead executioner is the princess Alicia, falsely accused of murdering her father the king and forced to flee to a remote castle in the Black Forest. The castle's resident dark power (explicitly named as Satan in the original *Deception*, but this time a less contentious anonymous ancient evil) grants Alicia refuge in exchange for the souls of the heroes sent to hunt her down.

Each stage is set in one of the estate's opulent chambers, which must be outfitted with a network of traps before the heroes' arrival. Selected from an armoury of falling urns, electrical blasts, spring-loaded spikes, pendulum blades and worse, each type of trap possesses properties that, ideally choreographed, can form a combo to finish off your victims as quickly as possible.

The action then proceeds in thirdperson, with the player's task to keep Alicia out of harm's way while luring her pursuers into it, then triggering the traps with the correct timing and sequence. Success results in a slow-motion replay that segues dementedly from slapstick to shlock horror.

The more grimly efficient your performance (it's unclear whether the Genocide Bonus from *Kagero* makes a reappearance), the more traps will be available for use in further stages: previous games have also featured a branching structure depending on who, if any, of your house guests you choose to spare.

It will be interesting to see if original series producer Keisuke Kikuchi's experimentation with *Fatal Frame* has had an effect on the development of *Dark Illusion*. Either way, it's certainly providing the violence to complement the sex of his friendly rival Itagaki's *Dead Or Alive*.

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 3**

Shining Tears

The force is still strong with Sega's superdeformed sprites as they prepare for another outing on PS2



***Shining Tears* remains stubbornly, or hearteningly, in thrall to the effects that defined Sega's 16bit era – rampaging quarter-screen sprites and a warping background heralds triple-digit damage for unfortunates caught in a super attack**







In addition to elven archer Elwing (above right), allies include a pink-clad catgirl ninja and a werewolf specialising in close-quarters combat – which should at least keep cooperative mode fresh, should the singleplayer AI be less adaptive

With the recently released GBA reworking of the original Mega Drive game and two new PS2 episodes, it's been a renaissance year for Sega's *Shining Force* series. Playable at TGS, *Shining Tears* was presented as a 'Tag Battle RPG' – newfangled talk for a surprisingly intense cooperative hack 'n' slash, as it turned out.

Your base of operations is a besieged city, with the majority of the game's missions involving defending it against overwhelming, but underskilled, enemy assault. It's also possible to venture outside of the walls and attempt 'Free Missions' in order to level-up and keep your characters in fighting form for the main game. Whether story-based or experience-gathering, missions consist of battles against large groups of enemies – screen-cloudingly large groups, taking full advantage of the 2D sprite presentation – which, in typical *Dynasty Warriors* style, can be either cut down in droves or routed by defeating their leader.

Though *Tears* has a single playable hero, Xion, he will always enter combat with a partner, chosen from available allies between missions: this choice affects the storyline and Xion's in-game abilities. In possession of both a light and dark soul, his alignment (and powers) will shift depending on his current partner's soul type. Each partner also provides beneficial effects to actions or statistics – and, generously, if you discover mid-mission that your chosen team skillset is unsuitable, it's possible to return to town and swap in a new character.

In singleplayer mode, your chosen partner fights under AI control, but can be shepherded with the right analogue stick if necessary. Holding R1 will instruct them to stand their ground, and in this state a magic attack can be released into the area between the two characters – presumably with a larger area inflicting less overall damage. Twoplayer gives complete control of the partner to the second combatant, and tandem attacks must be triggered in concert.

Defeating enemies during the course of a mission earns Status and Skill points, in addition to a bonus at its conclusion dependent on your ranking and fighting style. This bonus can be used to upgrade characters that sat out the mission, hopefully avoiding the common pitfall of less-used characters falling far behind the leaders in their advancement.

Though set for a North American release in 2005, *Tears'* superdeformed sprites and hand-drawn backgrounds will be clashing swords with the rendered splendour of *Dark Alliance's* extended family: the *Shining* name may have a fight on its hands before it can reclaim its place in western hearts and living rooms.

***Tears'* 2D visuals are some of the sharpest on the PS2 to date, with impressive background detail ranging from practically painted outdoor scenes to the fine linework of man-made structures. Combat effects are showier, breaking with the straight-from-manga style**



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **TRI-ACE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**



Radiata Stories

Only the first few pages were on offer at TGS, but there's no faulting the illustrations



Outdoor scenes scroll horizontally, intending to emphasise the game's watercolour landscapes. Warm daylight fades to blue-tinted night over time

While many had expected Tri-Ace's announcement to be the long-demanded sequel to *Valkyrie Profile*, the developer has instead produced an original title with a warm, painterly aesthetic and a scope dwarfing even *Suikoden*'s cast of thousands.

Plucky hero Jack Russell (only slightly less lamentably named than his friend and female lead, Ridley Timberlake) will meet 300 NPCs in his travels across the Radiata Kingdom, half of which are recruitable as party members. Each possesses unique special actions, and each can be visibly customised with increasingly lavish arms and armour. It's worryingly difficult to believe that Tri-Ace's art department has actually ever left the building in the years since the PS2's *Star Ocean* was released.

As is the current JPRG trend, battles play out in real time, with Jack under direct control and his three supporting characters managed by AI. The Link Battle System allows defensive or offensive strategies to be shared between characters – for instance, linking the party's healer to the other characters allows them to heal the party in the thick of combat. The Volty System, somewhat less exciting in practice than in title, appears to be a standard power-up gauge allowing access to stronger attacks when filled.

The storyline has its work cut out for it to match the splendour of the imagery, and it's currently on that imagery alone that the game stands tall alongside Square Enix's established juggernauts. Tri-Ace's intention with the title has been to produce something entirely different to its previous games: we hope that sense of adventure extends beyond the visuals.



***Radiata*'s plot begins with a break in the truce between humans and mythological creatures, finding Jack and co joining the war against elves, fairies and dragons. Expect at least one reversal of allegiance before the credits roll**



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 1)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2004 (JAPAN), 2005 (UK)**

Demento

Having coined the genre, Capcom introduces a new maxim: a dog is a survival-horror heroine's best friend

Capcom's gothic horror – mercifully in the traditional sense of the term – would be the developer's only TGS unveiling other than an update to *Monster Hunter*, but was a welcome original title in a show otherwise dominated by sequels.

Obviously drawing on a *Clock Tower* heritage with its relentless pursuers and unarmed heroine, *Demento* finds the sharply dressed Fiona Belli attempting to escape a looming castle and its troubled inhabitants. At first only able to outrun or evade pursuers, she soon gains a canine companion, Hewie, who can retaliate against Fiona's hunters – though likely as a diversionary tactic rather than a lethal solution. He can also be directed into otherwise-inaccessible areas in order to trigger mechanisms, nudge obstacles aside to clear an escape route, and retrieve items.

With only Fiona under direct control, *Demento* adds a new element to the list of survival-horror duties: maintaining Hewie's trust with regular care and attention. If neglected, he will be less likely to obey Fiona's commands – a potentially lethal liability when faced with hunchbacked brute Debilitas, the first antagonist to be revealed.

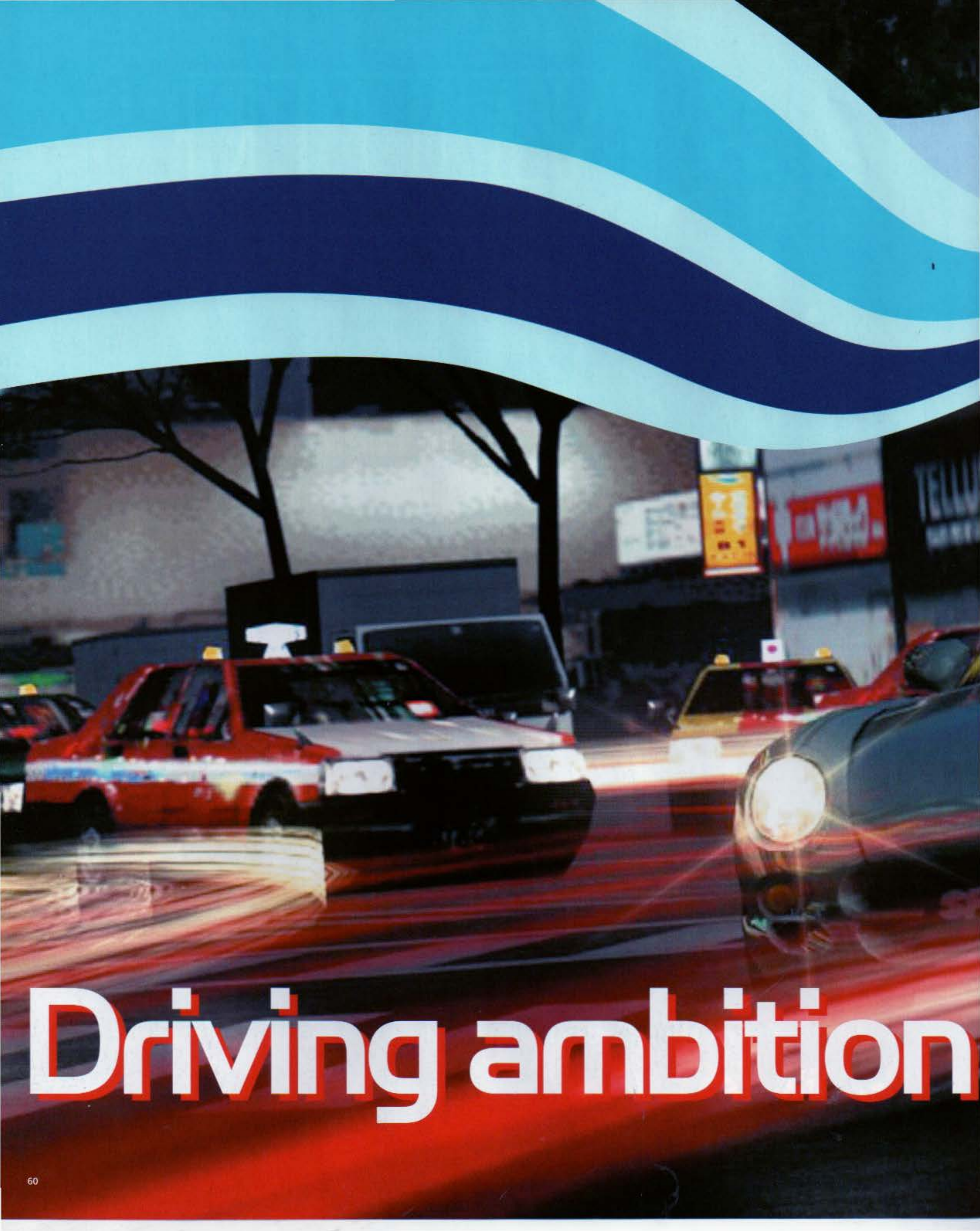
Debilitas' appearance, more wretched than gruesome, seems indicative of *Demento*'s tone – one somewhat less graphic than that of its sister franchises (though not averse to blood-slicked scenery). The Japanese release follows Capcom's current trend of English voiceovers with Japanese subtitles, so a speedy localisation should see a western version, redubbed *Haunting Grounds*, arrive early next year.



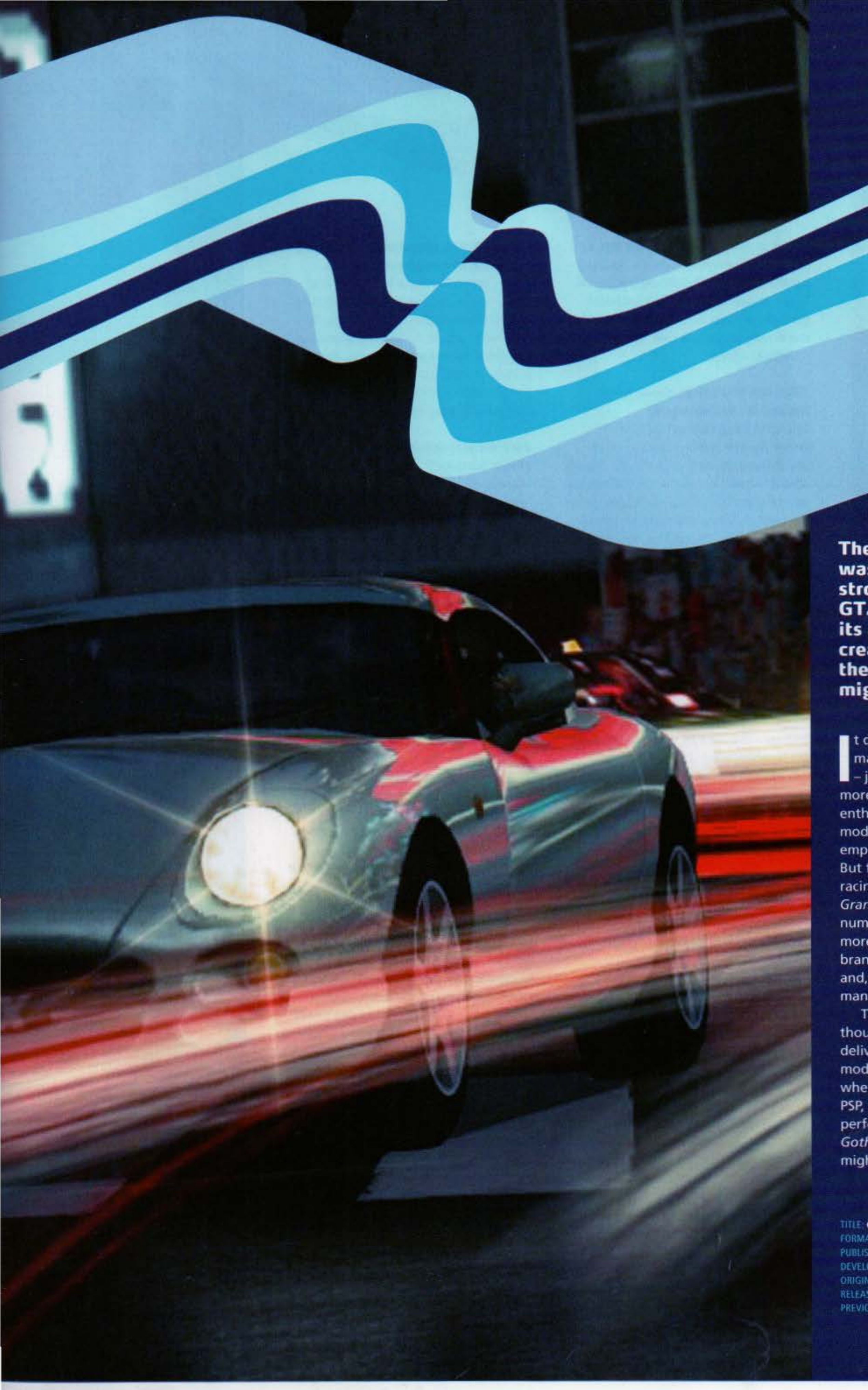
As in the *Clock Tower* games, tense situations cause Fiona to panic, signified at first by a pounding DualShock heartbeat, then by colour draining from the visuals



Once sufficiently trained, Hewie can intervene in the otherwise one-sided chases, allowing Fiona time to escape – unless she's rooted to the spot with fear



Driving ambition



The Gran Turismo brand was once among the strongest in gaming, but GT4: Prologue dulled its sheen. We meet its creator to discover how the full-blown experience might repair the damage

It doesn't seem that difficult a job, making another *Gran Turismo* game – just show your last one to a few more car manufacturers, get their enthusiastic agreement to put their models in your next game, and employ some designers to do the job. But for Polyphony Digital, making racing games is a labour of love, and *Gran Turismo 4* is more than just a numerically iterative sequel. There are more cars, sure, but there's also a brand-new physics engine, better AI, and, perhaps most intriguingly, a management-styled 'B-Spec' mode.

The additions seem to have a price, though, and *GT4* is no longer set to deliver its much-heralded online mode. Controversial? Perhaps, and when you weigh in rumours of *GT4* PSP, and the constant pressure to out-perform competitors like *Project Gotham*, it looks like life at Polyphony might not be so simple after all.

Continued ›

TITLE: **GRAN TURISMO 4**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E125, E138**



Kazunori Yamauchi: committed to online gaming, but not while bandwidth lags behind ambition

With this in mind, we made the trek to Polyphony's new headquarters, south of Japan's capital and bordering the bay of Tokyo, to talk to **Kazunori Yamauchi**, producer of *Gran Turismo 4*, about the real driving simulator's past, present, and – crucially – future.

What can you tell us about *Gran Turismo 4*'s B-Spec mode?
This is the innovative part of *GT4*. It's essentially a simulation mode in which you manage the race from the pit. There's a mode where you can follow the race by watching replays, or you can do the same but using statistics. The statistics screen displays the race in real time, showing all the cars' positions in a comprehensible way. It also informs you of the status of your car – the state of the tyres, etc. Time can be accelerated, and you can use customised cars from your garage to make them compete in this B-Spec simulation mode, like a kind of test. Your garage can contain up to 1,000 cars. This was a desire expressed by fans.

"Online is up and running. But in Japan, online features are not a strong sales argument, and we don't think the current infrastructure in Europe is capable of supporting GT4 online"





As is now accepted for the *Gran Turismo* series, instalment four features a mind-boggling variety of vehicles, from contemporary road models to classic rally performers such as the Lancia Delta

You said that 650 cars will be included in *GT4*, and that it takes a month for a designer to build one model, so how many designers are working on building vehicles?
I don't remember precisely but I think there are about 30 of them, which means we're able to make 30 cars a month. Most of the time, one designer is in charge of one set of cars, maybe from a given country, or formula, and so on.

But you're recycling some of the previous games' vehicles, too.
Yes indeed, more than 200 of them. However, we do not just import them; we improve their 3D models as well. We added a lot of new models as well, which means we had to improve the selection process. In Historical Select, you can choose cars grouped in five-year periods from 1945 up to today. Meanwhile, Maker Select gives you catalogues of every car maker present in the game.

With 650 cars, presumably you don't have 650 unique physics models.
Mmm, not really. There is basically one central car physics model in *GT*. It is then adapted to each car's specifications. So we have to adjust the balance according to various parameters of the car, like wheels, weight, etc. So in the end you get specifications adapted to each car and they are managed by central car physics.

Why did you decide to remove the online features?
I have to be honest with you. The online feature is up and running in our office. I mean it is already working in *GT4*. The only problem is that, firstly, in Japan, online features are not a strong marketing argument. Secondly, in Europe, we don't think the current infrastructure is capable of supporting *GT4* online. *GT4*'s scale is huge – developing the game alone is a painstaking task. So if you add the online feature to that, you need to organise things like a worldwide launch for the service, and that particular task is really beyond our capacity right now. We'd rather develop the game, and then consider things like that later.

Still, until the very last moment, and I mean a few days ago, we were willing to keep that feature in the game. My engineers were telling me it was working perfectly. But having spoken with our people from SCEE and SCEA, we decided to cut it from the final version. It really happened a couple days ago. We can't gamble on two horses at the same time. First we need to sell *GT4*, and then we'll work on building an online service worldwide with adequate play conditions. I think it will be enough of a challenge ensuring *GT4*'s success, so we don't need our attention distracted by bringing *GT* online globally. I don't believe two miracles can occur at the same time.

So, when *GT4* finally goes online, what sort of connectivity set-up will be needed to play it effectively?
We used to say broadband, and more precisely more than 1Mbps. I think that's sufficient to enjoy the game.

Will the service be free, or will you run some kind of subscription model? And is that decision down to you?
I don't know when the online version will be released, but decisions concerning it



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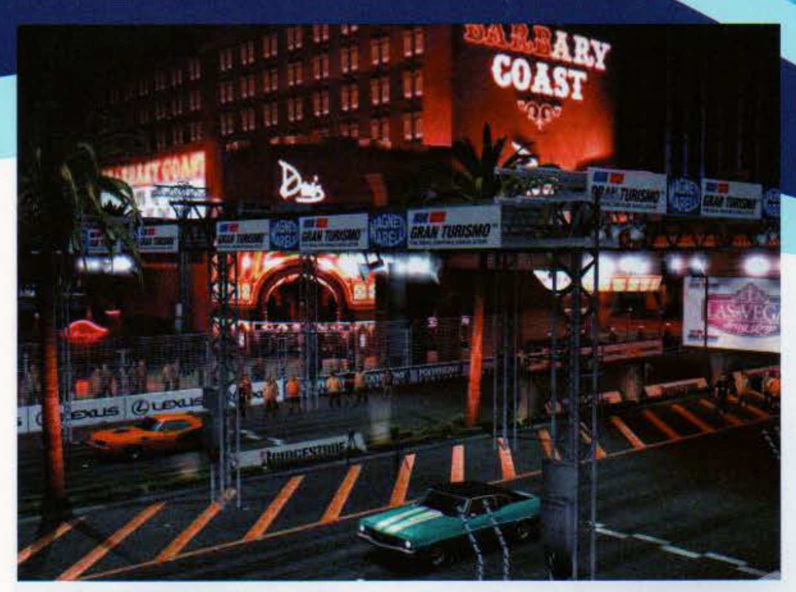
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1. Polyphony has just moved into new offices. The grand tour begins here. 2. Subaru *GT4*, powered by a bank of PS2 dev kits. 3. Mags. Lots of mags. 4. The view. 5. Small but perfectly formed. 6. Four wheels good, two wheels good enough. 7. Multiple views. 8. In the cockpit. 9. A server room – from the future. 10. Teamwork. 11. You don't see these very often. 12. Multiplayer, anyone? 13. Time for bed

Photography: **Hiroke Izumi**







Inner-city races emphasise speed, but heading out across the bay is where the scenery is really at. Drag races (top) are becoming familiar in console racers, but Polyphony's go the extra technical mile

will be ours at Polyphony Digital. But since the infrastructure isn't in place to run the service, and we haven't studied the question, we can't tell if it will be free or not and, if it requires a fee, how much. That sort of thing will will become more clear after we've released *GT4*.

With the *Prologue* version already out, *GT4* coming in December, the online version arriving in 2005 and a PSP conversion on the way, don't you think so many versions of the same game might wear it a little thin?

I think, especially with the *Prologue* version, that this is a real risk. Personally, I would have preferred to wait until *GT4* was finished, and not release the *Prologue* version. But Sony had its own reasons, so, in that case, I decided to make *Prologue*. The online version will not be released any time soon after *GT4*, because we want to maximise the game sales. The PSP version will be on a new console, and that means doing some serious research before we start anything on it. Then we will consider what to do and how to do it. My objective is to have *GT4* running as it is on it.

"The greatest achievement of this version of GT is certainly the B-Spec mode. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time and I had to wait until the right moment"



Attention to detail extends to people – both spectators and pit crew. Scenes like this highlight some surprisingly naturalistic animation – not bad for a studio that specialises in rigid car shapes

There's been no word as yet on AI. How much has it actually improved since *GT3*?

I think it is far more natural in *GT4*, particularly in the ways car overtake one another. It is even more obvious when you look at them through the B-Spec mode. You see these cars running like realistic cars with a human at the wheel, not like computer-controlled cars. Having said that, I think the biggest difference may be on the AI aggression level. Because they drive more naturally they are less aggressive – I remember that they were really aggressive in *GT3*, but in *GT4* they are more natural, so much more 'polite'.

And how have the physics improved?

I can't go into details, but I would say that the basic physics have been improved. *GT1* to *3* shared the same physics engine, but we've rebuilt it from scratch for *GT4*. I always thought the previous engine had flaws – we improved it through the three versions of the game, but we were developing another engine in parallel and we decided to use that one for *GT4*, and that marks a big generational change for the series. The new engine makes the car feel more natural.

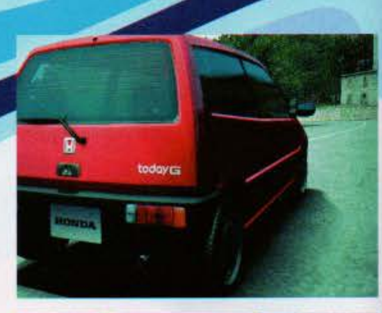
Actually, this is really what I've been looking for for the last few years. My goal was to allow an old woman to be able to drive a car in our game as long as she doesn't try to go too fast, just like in everyday life, I guess. The cars are now realistic in their appearance, but it's about time their behaviour and controls showed the same improvement. Of course, it depends on people's preferences, but I'm sure fans will instantaneously feel the change. Perhaps the core fans of *GT3* are going to stick with their version but I believe *GT4* offers real improvement in the driving experience.

With the improved graphics, will there be more restrictive limits on the number of cars in races?

The six-car limit remains. With such high technical standards we can't offer more on the PS2. But this time, we've effectively improved the background, adding humans, credible 3D models and animations. That said, in the sequences with these human models, we have to reduce the number of cars displayed.

In terms of audio, what about support for 5.1-channel sound?

Well, the game will offer 5.1-channel during its opening movie using AC3. But in-game, we have to adopt Pro Logic II technology instead. It ensures perfect sound reproduction. For instance, we've worked hard to improve the sound of the engine, again in the name of realism. Realtime 5.1-channel sound is still out of reach for the moment, at least when you consider the scale of what we want to accomplish in *GT4*.





At one end of the scale you have *OutRun 2*'s breezily coloured environments and boldly rendered Ferrari monsters, while at the other there is *GT4* with its photorealistically styled backdrops and tiny Honda runarounds with rear-window heating strips. A hot-air balloon seems a daring touch in Polyphony's game

Having made a series of racing games like this, you must have come across many challenges. How do you deal with producing better sequels?

There is one unique aspect of our development process for *Gran Turismo*. When we move from one version to the following one, there is not a single point during development that the game is not playable. We evolve the game from one version to the next, so it's playable right from the start. Adding new cars or tracks is not that difficult; you just need to make them fit the needs of the new version. But the greatest challenge is to find the right mix, the right balance. The greatest achievement of this version of *GT* is certainly the B-Spec mode. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time. It's been running deep inside me and I had to wait until the right moment. I'm so pleased I can finally share it.

What prevented you from releasing a B-Spec version of *GT* after A-Spec?

We considered it at the time. But having the very same cars and tracks from A- to B-Spec, the very same interface, and just bringing in new buttons to click while watching a race in progress… well, it just didn't seem like a separate game from the *GT* series. So it made sense to include it this time in *GT4*.

But will B-Spec be an experience that drives a future car simulation series parallel to the standard *GT* series?

I think so. I think we've reached a point now where the car physics are credible. They are good. The next step for me is to



Each type of car – of which there are 650 – takes one designer approximately one month to produce, from top to bottom. With this sort of scope, *GT4* may not need online play to give it longevity

make the AI as realistic. We are still some way from delivering realistic AI which reacts just as any human would. But it's a start, and B-Spec is a kind of a laboratory where we'll study and improve that aspect. Recreating human behaviour isn't easy, and I think we are just at one or two per cent of what would be a satisfying level. I believe we'll be able to get an interesting result in ten years' time. That's my main objective right now. So, in that perspective, having a car race simulation series is helpful.

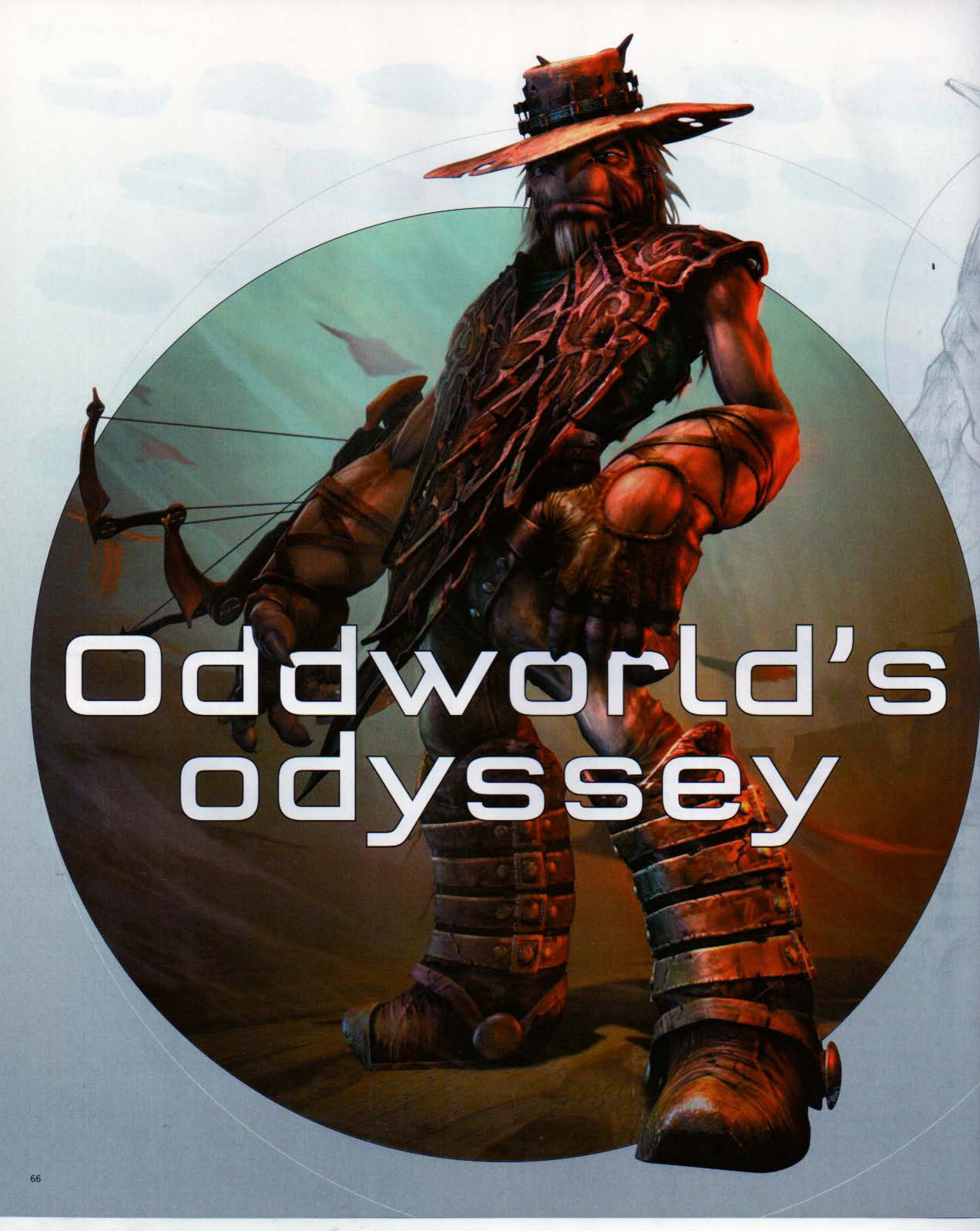
Where do you want to take *GT*?
I would like the *GT* series to be a car life simulator. If you just want a rough drive, the game can provide that, but it will be able to let you just watch cars, and make that as much fun as it is to drive them. I want the game to be the place where car lovers will gather, and just communicate their passion for the automobile.

Are you confident about delivering the same *GT4* on PSP?
I'm pretty confident we'll have the same physics on PSP. The machine's power will be able to process that. The problem comes with the game's graphics. I think we won't be able to keep the same number of cars on-screen with the same level of graphics quality – I guess we're looking at four, maybe even three cars on the same screen. Well, in the worst-case scenario we'll have two! Until now we've had a steady production cycle – two *Gran Turismos* per generation of console. With the arrival of the PSP everything changes. We will have one or two additional projects to develop on this new platform, and that makes our work harder.

What does it take to develop a game of *GT*'s scope?
The investments are colossal. Of course they are. We required a lot of investment at the start, but if you had a project of the same scale at another game company, we at Polyphony would require only a third or a quarter of their budget. We have 80 people working on *GT4*. If you compare that to a project the size of *Final Fantasy*, we are very reasonable.



As is always the case with *Gran Turismo* titles, Polyphony conducted months of research in the field. Thus, if you know your way around Paris, certain challenges should be a breeze...



Oddworld's odyssey

Six months ago Oddworld: Stranger had no publisher. Now it's EA's most promising title. Little wonder it's a game with a different kind of tale to tell

Lorne Lanning, co-founder of Oddworld Inhabitants, is leaning forward, a small heap of crisps forgotten in his palm. What he says is this: "Bad companies are the most fucking dangerous thing in the world today. Look at the United States – human interest is completely secondary to corporate interest. Everything post 9/11, post the Bush administration, all everything's about is screw the environmental issues, screw the public health issues, let's allow MORE mercury in the water. Why? Is it good for the people? No. It's WORSE for the people. Who's it better for? It's better for their friends who are running those corporations. And that is the biggest threat, in my opinion, facing the world today. It's not China, it's not North Korea – they might be serious threats – but the real danger is the big smiley face logo that pretends to be your friend and it's SCREWING the entire population." He sits back and smiles: "So, yeah, that's a pet peeve. I have a lot of angst."

Not much is known about Oddworld Inhabitants' new game, and there are two reasons for that. The first is that the company has made a sound decision to protect its story and its secrets from the hungry eyes of journalists. The second is that when you get hold of Lanning, asking him 'how-many-levels' and 'is-there-a-chaingun' questions seems like a waste of a potentially extraordinary conversation. As the co-founder of the company and the original visionary behind the odd world of Oddworld, Lanning has steered the company from oddysee to oddysee, from Abe's guffs to Munch's gurgles. Ten years on, few companies have survived so well on such a focused and peculiar vision. With *Stranger*, Lanning has a chance to take his mixed message of ugly beauty and comical politics to a new and ferociously sceptical audience: Xbox FPS fans.

With Stranger, Lanning has a chance to take his mixed message of ugly beauty and comical politics to a new and ferociously sceptical audience: Xbox FPS fans

In the absence of reams of press-release factoids, speculation has thrown up a few scraps of concrete information. *Stranger*, the fourth game from Oddworld Inhabitants, isn't strictly part of the Oddworld 'quintology'. Instead it's a side-story, taking place on the other side of planet Oddworld, miles from the factories of the Glukkons and the Vykkers. Its hero – Stranger – is a man of mystery, the mystery being that he's definitely not quite a man. His hybrid appearance may be part of his mysterious past, since there were indications very early in the game's development that Stranger's appearance could be a disguise for (or even a mutation into) something much more alien. A bounty hunter by profession, he plies his trade in a dusty western town, bringing various species of lowlife to justice with his double-barrelled crossbow. This shoots not inert bolts, but live animals – rapid-fire wasps and knockout skunk bombs, sticky spider traps and bat-propelled rockets – which must be hunted and herded when running low on ammo. Improvising combinations of double-barrelled destruction is at the core of the game's appeal.

It's this 'live ammo' which has caused much of the buzz surrounding the game, but it seems a little gimmicky compared to the game's real innovations. *Stranger* slips seamlessly between the perspectives, limiting you to slower speeds and ranged attacks in firstperson, allowing you breakneck acceleration and melee attacks in third. The range of views also allows exploration, platforming, puzzling and stealth to be closely integrated into the game without damaging the pure satisfaction of the gunplay. So why focus on the critters? "Is live ammo





Despite their feathers, the Clackers are the most instantly 'Oddworld' aspect of the new game. Attack them and they'll flee into their houses, squawking and criticising your lack of manners



really the main point?" echoes Lanning. "I think if you asked people who really know the game, they'd say: 'Only for marketing.' People have to have something to grasp on to, so when EA were looking at the game and saying: 'So, what is our 'X'? What is the thing we're going to build our marketing campaign around?', they – and rightfully so – identified live ammo as being the thing that people could grasp. And we said: 'Oh, but we've got this, this, this, this, this and this' and they said: 'And now they're confused'. So I think that if live ammo is interesting enough to draw people in in the first place, then that's what it needs to achieve. Because there's so much more there than you can cover in a soundbite."

It was this awareness of the need to capture the public's imagination in seconds which has shaped much of *Stranger*. "In the world of the modern media, if people don't understand your game in two seconds then you can't get through to them," Lanning claims. "So you can have the greatest game in the world,

Instantly recognisable and continually surprising, it's a luxurious and solid setting – everything Microsoft's Xbox was supposed to deliver



The game's trademark live ammunition is animated, active and mouthy. Squirming around in your crossbow barrel, they react with shrill panic or aggressive enthusiasm to the prospect of being fired. Lanning assures us that they've been calibrated to ensure that this doesn't become grating as the game moves on and the novelty wears off

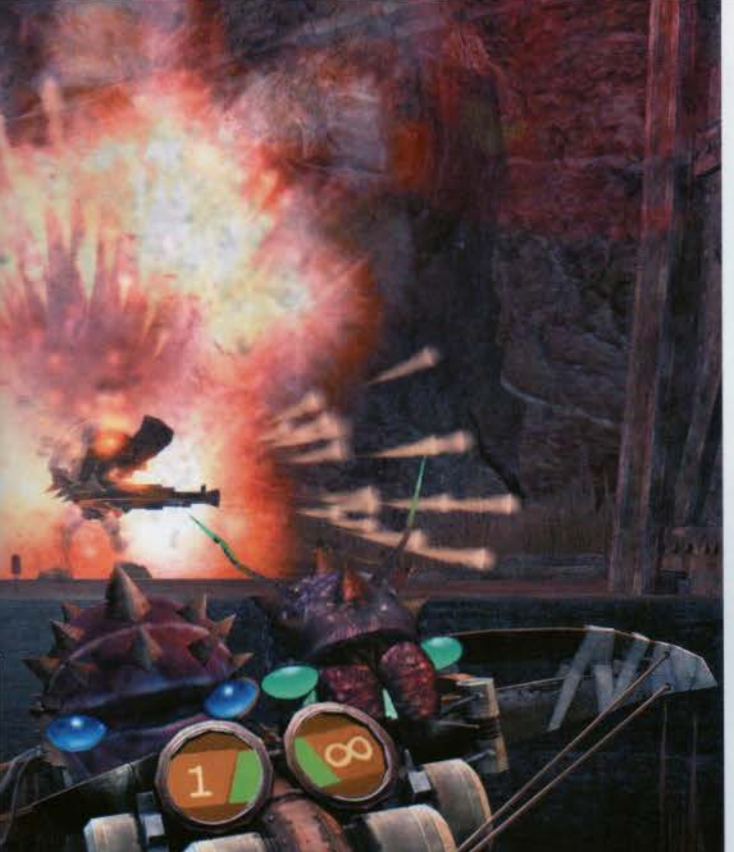


but if people have to have their hands on it for 20 minutes before they 'get' it, you're in deep trouble. So we wanted to have something that was a little more familiar, which is part of why we chose the western theme – because people get that: it's bounty hunting, it's outlaws, it's gunfights. And we liked the whole concept of Sergio Leone shootouts – that's something we really wanted to get into."

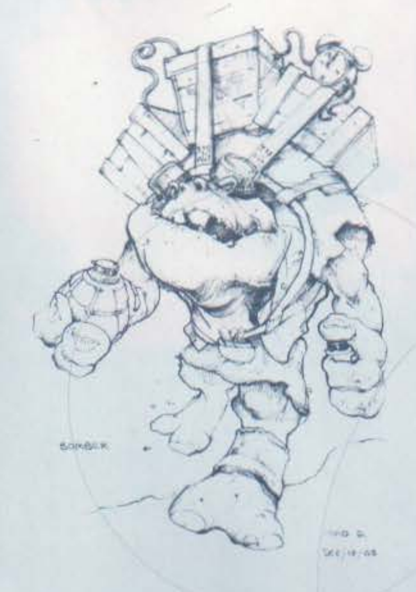
The result of Oddworld meeting the spaghetti western is a Frankenstein setting which doesn't have any business working as well as it does – caricatured chickens pretending to be men in the same way that Italian extras pretended to be American and the Spanish desert pretended to be Mexico. Instantly recognisable and continually surprising, it's a luxurious and solid setting – everything Microsoft's Xbox was supposed to deliver. Once Stranger's bounties take him beyond the local dust-bowls, the terrain will give way to pine forests, granite cliffs and snow-capped mountains.

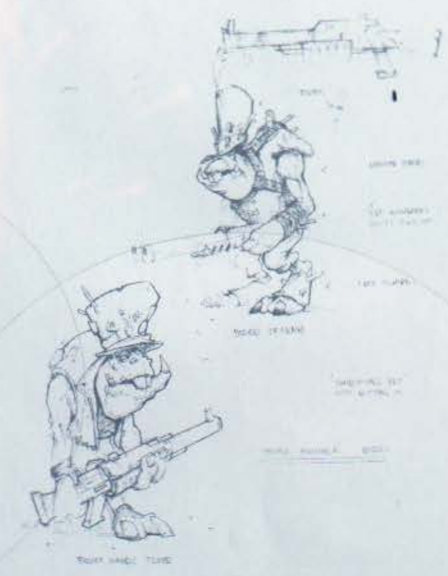
So, if commercial appeal lay behind the game's setting, what lay behind the decision to mix thirdperson exploration with firstperson gunplay? Earlier Oddworld games had entirely refreshed the platforming genre – integrating spatial puzzles into a mechanic which had traditionally tested only dexterity. Is *Stranger* a similar attempt to rejuvenate the thirdperson adventure? "The answer to that is yes, except it was the FPS we were looking at and asking how that could evolve, how we could get more thirdperson action play into it." For Lanning, game design urgently needs to move beyond a point where perspective matters: "You don't say: 'Oh, I'm going to go and see a handheld movie, or I'm going to go and see a longshot movie.' You just go to see a movie. That's a medium which has matured, but at one point it was really just a peep show, and you would watch and a train would go by. That was it. Games are still at that stage."

Oddworld Inhabitants also thought that the firstperson perspective was a potential barrier for gamers. "A huge aspect for us is orientation, and an awful lot of people don't have a good response to a firstperson perspective – they get headaches – and I'm one of them. I'll get a headache after playing for two hours," confesses Lanning. "So we want to break from that, to have a smooth choreography between



TITLE: **ODDWORLD: STRANGER**
FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **ODDWORLD INHABITANTS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2005**





perspectives so you're not always in that mode. *Halo* was an AWESOME game, but I could still only play it for two hours at a stretch, because I'd get disoriented, especially when it got into smaller rooms – you know when you're going through the tunnels? So we're trying to remedy those things. We're thinking how we get more people interested in games, and shooters, for example, don't interest a large number of females. But I do think they'll be interested in this, and early focus testing says that's true. And that's because it's not what experience has taught them shooters are all about – it's not all in firstperson and it's not all about killing. It offers a lot more, and it's not like women didn't like Sergio Leone movies, they LOVED Sergio Leone movies. You can't just ask: 'Oh, how do we make games for girls?' – that's insulting, right? You end up with Barbie games. Come ON. Girls have a brain, more of a brain in fact, and that's why they're not interested in most games."

Indeed, people with brains (regardless of their reproductive identity) are exactly the people Oddworld Inhabitants was conceived to attract: "Sure, you can make entertainment that doesn't have some kind of nutritional value but we aren't in the junk-food business. WE aren't – other people can be and that's fine, and I'll eat some of it and like it. Look at Sherry [McKenna, Oddworld Inhabitants' other co-founder] – she would not be interested in running this company at ALL if it wasn't for the characters and the stories, because she couldn't care less about the gameplay. She just says: 'Make sure it's good. Is it good? Are you promising me it's good?' because she just has no interest in playing. And if those stories and characters weren't there and if she didn't care about them then she'd just go off and do something else. She definitely doesn't need to

Stranger's stealth system is admirably simple. Scurry into the long grass and the UI will say 'hidden'. Pop into view and it will change to 'spotted'. Who needs a fancy shadow meter?



Oddworld just got rarer

***Stranger*, originally known as *Steef's Oddysee*, has had a rocky path towards release.**

Earlier this year, Microsoft pulled out from publishing the game. Lanning explains: "It's the kind of game where you have to see the vision and buy into it before you can support it – I don't think Microsoft believed we could pull it off." The irony is that this hesitancy was already evident in the game's first public airing – a 2003 Discovery Channel special about the Xbox which featured Ed Fries lamenting that Lanning never knew when to stop adding new ideas. The move to EA Partners was one which the company was very positive about, not least because it brought with it access to the PS2 demographic, a crucial component in Oddworld's biggest market – Europe. Speaking earlier this year, Sherry McKenna (Oddworld Inhabitants' CEO) described EA's confidence: "We didn't think it could be done. But EA absolutely said: 'No, this game can be converted,' and that's why we went with them." Now, the suspicions of everyone who's seen this resource-hungry game running have been confirmed: EA has cancelled the PS2 version. It's not clear exactly what lay behind that decision, but there's no question that the conversion was lagging far behind the Xbox version and would have had to be released months later.

The early enemies you meet seem dumb – not because their AI is lacking, but because that's their character. In fact, the AI was one of the earliest parts of the game to be developed, since your live ammunition can only act alive if it has an AI telling it when to scarper



Although keen to stress the team effort, the game is very personal for Lanning, who provides the truly extraordinary voices of the characters

be running a games company."

There's no detailed information yet on where *Stranger*'s story will take players. A point will come when the individual bounties Stranger accepts give way to reveal a main, central goal. In keeping with Lanning's passionate feelings about corporate greed and public health, Stranger's ultimate nemesis is a water baron, ruthless in his control over the flow of water to those living downstream. Lanning relishes the chance to be able to integrate his social concerns into the games he makes: "There are not many other media that let you make characters you care about and stories that mean something to you, so you can feel like you're doing something a little bit virtuous, like you're not just making Twinkies."

Creating characters and

telling stories are not things games have traditionally excelled at, however, although Oddworld's games have always stood out. How does Lanning's approach differ from other game makers'? "With a lot of games, I feel like they have stories pasted on top of them, because the gameplay itself has nothing to do with the story. So what we try and do at the concept stage is design a story so that it's part of the character. With Stranger, when you find out more about him, it makes a lot more sense about why he uses live ammo, about why he doesn't like guns. It all ties in to the weapons that he uses and the speed he runs in the game. The mechanics of what he does in the world are totally related to his character and the story. And that's a lot more challenging than saying: 'OK, here's a guy with a gun, and you've seen 50,000 guys with guns, but this one's different because he got fucked over by his wife and now he wants revenge on the mob.' And you go: 'Well, maybe that's an interesting story and maybe it isn't, but it's still just a guy with a gun who does the same shit he does in every other game.'"

While he doesn't make it sound easy, Lanning at least makes designing 'nutritious' games sound feasible. Yet the number of games released each year with such lofty ambitions can usually be counted on the thumb of one hand. What needs to be done to encourage more people to make more nourishing games? "One of the first things we've got to do is stop doing shows like E3 and Game Stars Live. Because they're so loud, the only thing that gets noticed is the fastest cut, the most explosive demo. Things like E3 – look, we need E3, I know – but these events are starting to shape the product. It's like going to Cannes or





Melee-based, the thirdperson combat is no less fulfilling. Your top speed of 55mph allows you to 'clothesline' some slow-moving prey. Useful, since live bounty is worth much more than dead



Sundance and going into one huge room with a hundred screens and every screen is playing a movie and everybody is turning it up trying to be louder than the other guy. And if someone's showing a beautiful love story you go: 'Well, that sucks, because the cool one over here has MTV-style editing and cool explosions with people's heads getting blown off.'"

The movie analogy doesn't end with Cannes. For Lanning, film represents a benchmark that games are yet to reach: "With a game you sit down, often alone, for hours at a time. And you're focusing on it for more time than you spend with a film and yet it has less depth to it that your average film. That's less than an average film, not less than a good film. Games aren't even close to the depth a POOR film has yet. In time we'll see that all the things that make a film great are all the things that make a game great. If I look back on the history of this company, back to the SNES and the Genesis, games and films might as well have been the sun and the moon they were so completely different. And even a game of a film, well, maybe you were the Terminator and you shot at robots, but that was the only thing the film and the game had in common.

"But today, it's much closer – graphically it's closer, you see the characters, you have voice delivery, you have soundtracks. Take *The Sims*, right? And look at that, at what they've added for the new one. It's love stories, it's dating. It's all the things that have come from traditional entertainment in the last hundred years."

But, we point out, those aren't things that came from films. Those are things that came from life. Lanning chuckles. "Well," he declares, "we're ALL emulating life." Oddworld, with its parps and its burps, its social inequalities and political satires, its characters as clumsy as they are kind and as cruel as they are witless, has always done a better job of emulating life than most. *Stranger* still has to prove how well it can bear the weight of its ambitious story and the risk of its social sermons, but there's no doubt that its basic structure – the world, the weapons, the controls – are robust enough to handle almost anything Lanning piles on them.

And that might be quite a lot. He leans forward again, remembering something he read in that morning's paper: "Those guys who've stolen money from pension plans, they should be going to prison for life. They should get a longer term than a violent criminal, because how many people are they screwing over? Even the very worst serial killer, how many people did they take out? How many people's retirements did they ruin? Thousands of people, they just DECIMATED their whole financial existence. And for what? For a nice house in Aspen or somewhere. Those guys are PIGS..."

So, yeah. He has a lot of angst. And for that *Stranger* – and videogames in general – should perhaps be grateful.

Although best known for its characters, Oddworld's landscapes have always been distinctive. A lavish artbook, available through the company's website, celebrates the studio's first ten years



Oddworld, with its parps and its burps, its social inequalities and political satires, has always done a better job of emulating life than most



Each type of ammunition has its own range and its own reticule. Swapping between them brings up a pause screen which lets you draw breath as you pick a nasty new combination




NINTENDO DS™

Dual fuel

Twin displays, wireless multiplayer, mic input, touchscreen control and the small matter of new Nintendo software are driving a unique console. We visited Nintendo of America to witness a new era for handheld gaming



In January 2004, Nintendo made an announcement that bamboozled the world. The Nintendo DS – a handheld that wasn't the new GBA – was coming, promising a revolution in the way we play games. Its twin screens would offer a mysterious 'new perspective' on gaming. As new details trickled out, no one was any more convinced: it seemed like a chimera, a mythical beast made up of a peculiar oddment of parts. On November 21 it launches in the US, and what a difference a year makes. In this industry we're used to waiting twice that long for a game, let alone a new kind of hardware. Nintendo, not usually noted for its speed, has gone from press release to shop shelf in the space between two Christmases. It's a remarkable achievement – befitting a remarkable machine.

Nintendo of America's Gamers' Summit, which ran over the same two days as the Tokyo equivalent, was the first access Nintendo had granted to the finished hardware and a wide range of first- and thirdparty games. Its new machine acquitted itself faultlessly. It had everything Nintendo promised: twin screens, touch control, microphone input and wireless networking, all delivered in a unit which is robust if not beautiful, with a battery which should last ten hours and a retail price of $150 (£85). There are at least 140 games in development,

Ridge Racer DS

Effectively a port of the N64 game, *Ridge Racer* has taken a bold step in embracing the DS. The lower screen is given over to a steering wheel, which you can turn with the stylus as you try to wrench your car around the track. Wrench is the right word as, at this stage, *Ridge Racer* is the only actually unworkable implementation of the touchscreen. Truly useless, you'll abandon it for conventional D-pad control within seconds. It's worth the transition, however, since the game itself is solid enough. Even those with unenthusiastic memories of the original might find themselves wooed back by something which offers a reassuringly old-fashioned thrill among all the DS's innovations.





Asphalt Urban GT

Another solid racer, although with less definite handling feedback than *Ridge Racer*. Of the games shown so far, this was one of the worst cases of map-'n'-menu use of the second screen, and the multiplayer set-up was buggy.





Nintendogs/ Puppy Times

Nintendo's in-house attempt to update the pet sim. Each dog you raise will respond to voice commands over the microphone, and can be stroked and tickled with a twitch of the stylus.

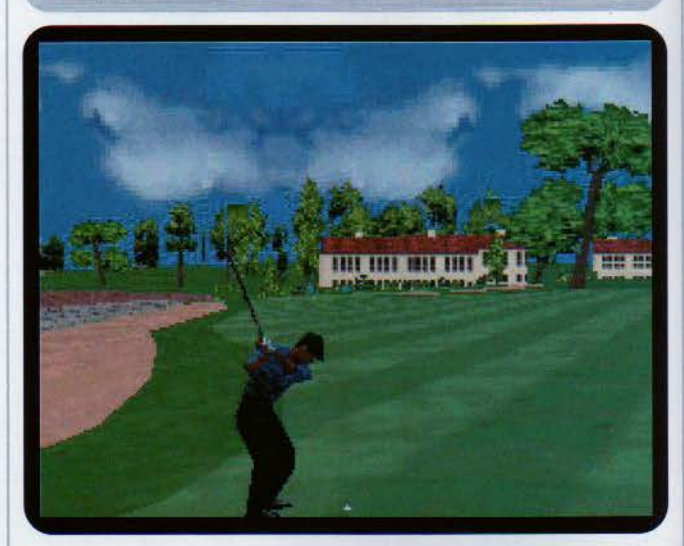




Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf

One of the first games to take full advantage of the mouse's ability to echo a real-world movement, it's unsurprising to see golf debut on the DS. Nor is it surprising to see that it's the *Tiger Woods* franchise supplying it, since it was the first console golf game to translate that experience on to an analogue stick. Golf is also an uncannily good match for the DS's 3D/2D splitscreen set-up. A full 3D visualisation of the course – pushing the DS probably as far as anything else to date – fills the top screen, while the bottom is free for 2D course overviews, menu screens and an analogue control panel. Each hole starts with a flyby, synchronised between both screens, and selecting a point on the map screen with your stylus zooms the 3D view to that point on the course.

Once you've selected your shot, the stroke is played by sweeping the stylus in a backwards 'U' – longer for more power, carefully curled to add (or avoid) fade and draw. Putting works well, with a precise grid display and the caddy tips familiar from the home console version of the game. A power boost can be added to shots by scribbling furiously on the touchpad before starting the stroke – a rather contrived translation of the joypad button-bashing system. This, a few aspects of the camera system, and the presentation of the swing meter – inexplicably divided into 12ths – need tidying, but *Tiger Woods* looks very promising.





of which dozens will be available by Christmas. Rather than the spectre of lacklustre GBA ports, many take full advantage of the DS's odd range of capabilities, and those that do deliver on Nintendo's initially vague promise of a revolution. Nothing ever felt quite like this – there were no crashes, no flat batteries and only a handful of prerelease bugs. The chimera has been replaced by a thoroughbred.

It's still an ugly thoroughbred – a squat stack of lines and planes built out of nasty plastic. Functionally, however, those looks are inspired. The nasty plastic keeps the cost down, making the $150 bundle – complete with PictoChat and a generous *Metroid Prime Hunters* demo – massively appealing. Nintendo's new hero **Reggie Fils-Aime** (NoA's executive vice president of sales and marketing) calls it "a massmarket price," and he's right. Rather than endure a year of gradual price slicing, the DS is starting where the GBA ended up. And the squat clamshell encloses a device that is easily tough enough to endure a lifetime of school bags and bedroom floors. Dropping a DS isn't going to stop your heart.

Its size – definitely too big for



Wario Ware Inc.

No one was ever going to need much convincing about how happy a marriage this was going to be. *Wario Ware*, in many respects, was the software forerunner for the new Nintendo philosophy of which the DS's design is the hardware expression: accessible, instinctive gaming which fits into the cracks of a player's life. It's the game no one has a reason not to play.

It works as perfectly on the DS as you assumed. No one needs instructions to know they want to whirl all the paper off a loo roll in one ecstatic spool. No one needs telling that the duck belongs in a cage. No one can help wincing when they yank out that unsightly hair by the root. No one needs telling to keep that plate spinning or get those vegetables chopped. *Wario Ware*'s knowing sense of humour is also intact, occasionally showing you a picture of a GBA and asking you to touch its buttons with your stylus to control the game. It guarantees that your face will oscillate between puzzlement and delight as rapidly as it did in the original.

Despite the adoration *Wario Ware* has generated, it's not yet a title that has been particularly profitable for Nintendo. As close as it is to being the DS's killer app, the next few months ought to turn that situation on its head. It also makes designing the DS marketing campaign that little bit simpler. *Wario Ware* pods on every street corner should easily do the trick.









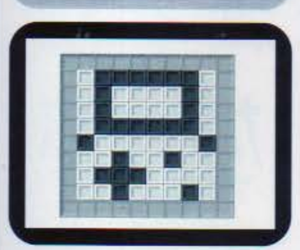




Nintendo has stuck with the square shape and cardboard format for US DS game packaging. US games will retail for $30 (£17), whereas releases in Japan will fall across a wider range

One Line Puzzle

Nintendo's in-house puzzle game will be available for the Japanese launch of the DS. To clear the stage, you need match the colours by drawing a single continuous line over the panels, which will then flip from black to white.





a pocket – is explained by the wealth of features it contains. The tiny stylus (Nintendo can presumably guarantee profitability simply by the number of replacements it will be able to sell) works with perfect precision on the touchscreen – although your thumbs will often do just as well. The machine's wrist strap also doubles as a mini stylus, strapping over a thumb to give you greater accuracy. Once your brain makes the tiny adjustment to being able to touch what it can see, anything else seems like a step back. Expect to endure an embarrassing touchscreen hangover as you poke and prod uselessly at mobile phone screens, PC monitors and TV sets.

The quality of the display on both screens is good – 3D moving with smooth detail and 2D glowing with vibrant colours. GBA games (the console is fully backwards compatible) load into a front slot, and look extremely impressive. You can switch off the backlight via a menu option, but you're unlikely to want to. Audio, from stereo speakers or headphones, is clear and rich. Buttons are of the usual handheld standard, although movement on the D-pad may not be quite as distinct as on the SP.

The most straightforward flaw of the DS is its ergonomics. It's hard to see how Nintendo could have avoided this – the machine is likely to be held and used in a variety of unpredictable ways. However, the fact remains that holding the machine while using the stylus and covering the buttons is likely to lead you to develop some peculiar hand positions. In keeping a rather traditional approach to the machine's layout, Nintendo may have underestimated how strongly 'true' DS games are likely to rely on the stylus. Many of these play best with the unit

Expect to endure an embarrassing touchscreen hangover as you poke and prod uselessly at mobile phone screens, PC monitors and TV sets

Sprung (formally Crush)

The name change is as baffling as the game, it must be said. Ubisoft's dating sim ('I can't believe that guy cheated on me with that cow from HR' not being words you expect to hear from a Nintendo console) is an old-fashioned dialogue-tree game. Choose your answer, and watch as the limited conversational options become exhausted and you either triumph and get the girl, or have to endure a long dinner party with a man who wants you to measure his head with a bucket (yes, really). Always assuming you've found the bucket. It's hard to imagine this being supported on any other console, and the touchscreen interface is a pretty slender excuse for sneaking it on to the DS.





placed flat on a surface, but this can lead to a slight frustration in getting the perfect viewing angle for the bottom screen. No doubt some enterprising peripheral firm will launch a DS wedge holster, for perfect tabletop gaming.

The DS's most significant hardware revolution is invisible – its wireless capabilities. Cables and costs have plagued the last generation of Nintendo innovation. GC-to-GBA link-up was a modest enough expense, but the costly tangle of *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* and the escalating price of four-cart, four-cable GBA connection put off consumers, and therefore developers, too. DS changes everything. Not only does wireless give you cost-free, cable-free multiplayer, it allows players to share their games in a way they never have before. Now, only one player needs to own the game for his friends to play, as his DS can broadcast the required software to other players once a session begins.

Previously, games like the eightplayer *Jam With The Band* would have proved commercial suicide: it's the kind of game only worth owning if all of your friends own it too, and none of your friends own it because it's only worth owning if all of their friends own it, etc, etc. Now, it's worth buying and worth playing because if you have it, then everyone has it. So long, that is, as they have a DS. Nintendo has turned the model on its head, using software to sell hardware.

Hundreds of question marks, good and bad, remain over the wireless systems. How well regulated will the game set-up systems be? Will many games be multiplayer with just one cart, or only some? How long will it take to upload the game to another player's DS? What is the maximum number of players the DS will be able to host? Just how expandable is the range (currently confirmed at 30 to 100 feet)? Will interesting gimmicks – such as the capability to download new Pokémon wirelessly to your DS as they appear onscreen during the new Pokémon movie – be one-offs, or become a wider part of DS ownership? The prospects are tantalising but, crucially, Nintendo is demonstrating from the off that the core function of wireless – the multiplayer – is fully operational. *MP Hunters: First Hunt* may prove the most important piece of bundled software in Nintendo's history.

Software is, of course, the key to the DS. This is not a machine that is going to sell on its looks alone. Nor, any more, on its brand. (Shorn of the untarnished Game Boy name, the Nintendo

DS changes everything. Not only does wireless give you cost-free, cable-free multiplayer, it allows players to share their games in a way they never have before

Another

Despite the disappointment of *Sprung*, the DS is an obvious home for point 'n' click (point 'n' touch?) adventures. Nintendo's *Another* will require you to use both the stylus and the microphone to solve its puzzles.





Rayman DS

The only concrete details so far suggest that Ubisoft doesn't have any great ideas up its sleeve for that second screen ('interactive menu', no less), but the brand alone should ensure this popularity with the mass market.





Mr Driller: Drill Spirits

Another match made in heaven. The DS's twin screens give Mr Driller the portrait orientation he's been crying out for for years, and the touchscreen interface makes his job easy and precise. Simply touch the block you want rid of, and use the top screen to keep an eye on the precarious towers shuddering down toward you. Advanced players may find the touchscreen a little unresponsive for lightning-fast manoeuvres, but the game includes full button support so there's nothing preventing a return to basics. A new mode (where you're chased by a giant drill) and some fresh characters do little to upset the simple equation of Mr Driller's appeal. Just don't forget to breathe.





Caduceus: Surgical Operation

One of the earliest DS announcements, this surgery game requires a steady stylus as you carve your way through your patients, and a steady voice as you coo reassuringly to calm them.







DS games arrive on chunkier versions of SD-style cards. So the media, at least, is totally dinky

Pokémon Dash

Simply scrub with your stylus to send Pikachu scampering from one checkpoint to the other. The inclusion of hot-air balloons wasn't enough to save this – a Japanese launch game – from looking rudimentary and repetitive.





The Urbz DS

The Urbz is the result of EA eyeing up exactly the demographic that the DS is supposed to hit – teenagers and 'young adults', the very people who found the suburban simplicity of *The Sims* too twee and safe. Sadly, *The Urbz* seems as unlikely to appeal on the DS as on any other platform – a self-conscious, unfocused misunderstanding of the first game's core appeal, it's clogged with repetitive minigames and preaches an unsettling message of conformity (move to a new area, and you can only make friends by dressing like the locals). Adding body piercing and motorbikes to an unappealing gameworld seems unlikely to crack open the wallets of picky teenagers – for either EA or Nintendo.





Super Mario 64 DS

It is difficult to imagine a more hazard-laden idea than this: *Mario 64*, a game whose brilliance lay in how perfectly it had been designed around its controller, ported to a wildly different system. Many changes have been made to help it adapt to its new home – new characters (Yoshi, Wario and Luigi are all playable), new moves (spin jumps and Yoshi's strained hover) and new levels (the brief glimpses available so far don't indicate anything with the inventive wit of the originals) – but none are truly convincing. The third iteration of the control scheme (movement on the stylus, jump/attack/crouch on the D-pad) unquestionably works, but lacks the precision that made the original an exercise in joy. It remains to be seen how perseverance will change the experience of playing these familiar levels in a quite different manner.

The new minigames – of which there are over 30 – couldn't provide a more startling contrast. All touchscreen-based, some provide the same teasingly twitchy pleasures as *Wario Ware*, while others evolve into much more rounded puzzle games. All are pure DS, deploying the twin screens and the stylus to full and unexpected effect, and are easily good enough to justify a full game on their own. It's hard to imagine a title that could better demonstrate how crucial it will be for DS software to be designed specifically around the capabilities of its hardware.





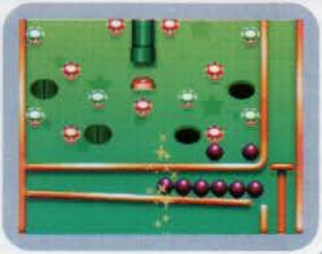












label carries as much negative baggage as fanboy kudos.) What will sell the DS are the games that make owning one fun, and on this front Nintendo has also achieved something remarkable.

The handheld market is crowding out – the N-Gage, Tapwave Zodiac and the Gizmondo all trying to stake their place while the prospect of the PSP floats above them like a hulking Death Star – and all are trying to differentiate themselves on hardware. The N-Gage is the phone one, the Zodiac is the PDA one, the Gizmondo is the GPS one, but not one (as yet) has a distinctive piece of software to call its own. Indeed, none of those companies have yet proved that they have any instinctive understanding of the kind of games people want to play on personal gaming devices. Among me-too console clones and ill-advised D-pad FPSs, all are yet to release the software which will define the point of owning their machine. It's in this arena that Nintendo's 15 years of experience is telling.

Why own a device with wireless? Play *Hunters* and find out. Why own a device with a touchscreen? Play *Yoshi's Touch And Go* and find out. Why own a device with a microphone input? Croon to your patients in *Caduceus* and find out. Why own a device with two separate screens? Play *Tiger Woods Golf* and find out. These games – varied and, strikingly, not all firstparty – all operate as convincing reasons to own a DS rather than any other machine. Nintendo knows more about fitting games into people's lives and into pockets (or schoolbags or handbags or manbags or whatever) than anyone else, and it's hard to shake the feeling of a master returning to teach the new kids a lesson.

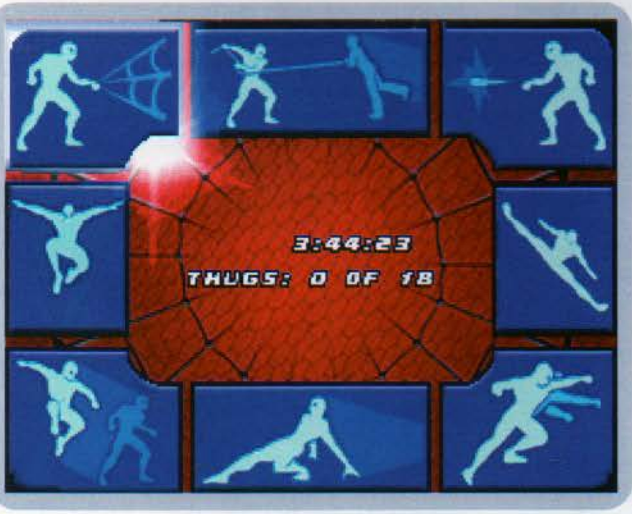
This isn't overstating the situation: Nintendo still has plenty to prove about the software potential of the DS. Of the games it's been possible to preview, as many are misses as hits. The incredibly rapid development of the machine has left little time for new content creation. Teams with only a few

Spider-Man 2

Rather weirdly singled out as "my personal favourite" by Fils-Aime, *Spider-Man 2* is something of an anomaly in the early DS line-up. Despite being surrounded by developers over-reaching themselves to take full advantage of the DS's capabilities, *Spider-Man 2* is fundamentally little different from a GBA game. The top screen shows the smooth and fluid 2.5D platforming action, the touchscreen acting only as a giant selection pad for Spidey's special moves. While this does allow rapid switches of tactic, it feels a rather transparently token DS gesture.

The lack of 'DS-ness', however, is no real criticism of the game. A soaring platformer with elements of side-scrolling brawler, *Spider-Man 2* is as free and intoxicating as all good Spider-Man games must be. Web-slinging and wall sticking make movement freeform and improvised, and the combat is promisingly flexible. Vicarious Visions' challenge is to produce level design robust enough to withstand the shortcuts that enterprising players are sure to find, and to vary mission requirements and combat encounters so the game's scale doesn't become a slog. The demo level available was complex and interesting, but lacked focus and a sense of progression. If this is fixed, Spider-Man could make a very happy home for himself on the DS – even if he hasn't packed a stylus, a mic or a second action screen.





Ping Pals

Ping Pals' core function – a text-and-sketch-based wireless message system – mirrors exactly that of Pictochat, which comes free with the DS. For the extra $20 all you'll get is an extremely likeable customisable avatar.





months to complete a project have had to focus all their efforts on mastering the new input possibilities of the machine, recycling existing GBA and N64 content to fill the gaps. Others have struggled to find – or to successfully implement – those new input possibilities in their game designs. Consequently, there's no clear answer yet on how dramatically the DS will reshape the nature of game design. Will things never be the same again, or will the DS settle down into a groove of creating intuitive puzzles and minigames, and cloning mouse-dependent old favourites?

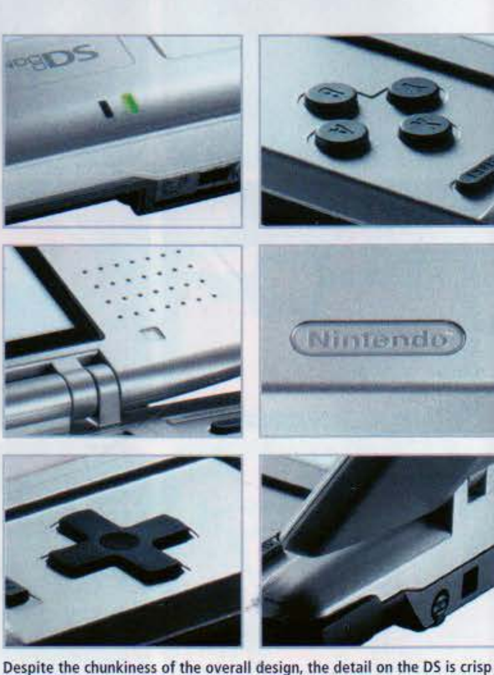
It's a big question, but we're unlikely to have to wait long for an answer. Some launch DS games have been put together in a whisker under six months. That means second-generation DS games will be with us sometime in the spring. And, unlike the limited success of GC and GBA link-up, this time Nintendo isn't working alone. The DS has received almost unprecedented support, particularly from the Japanese development community, and with good reason. Fils-Aime sums it up: "What we're doing allows ideas to trump budgets." At a time when development costs and times are spiralling, the DS is the first sign of a hardware

Feel The Magic: XX/XY

Now mature enough to have its own title (and one with a little genetics gag at that), Sega's rubbing game has revealed a grown-up theme. You'll be using the stylus the win the affections of a rather haughty girl by picking scorpions off her, protecting her from rampaging bulls and gently cleaning dirt patches off her skin while she oohs and ahhs encouragingly. The final nail in this delightful and daringly stylish game's hopes of ever being played in public is when you have to huff into the microphone to blow out candles. It's not clear at this stage how many more of these winsome and unpredictable ideas it has up its sleeve, or whether the overall pace will prove frustratingly slow. ▮







Despite the chunkiness of the overall design, the detail on the DS is crisp and functional. Four face buttons, plus start, select and shoulder buttons give more game options, and the tiny stylus slots away behind the hinge

Yoshi's Touch And Go

Yoshi's Touch And Go is what happens when Nintendo designs a radical new piece of hardware and then crafts a videogame around it. The last time the company did that, we got *Mario 64*, and *Touch And Go* shares much of its magic.

Two levels were available to play. The first sees Baby Mario tumbling to earth, supported only by a handful of balloons. To protect him from enemies (and steer him towards coins) you must use the bottom screen to draw in platforms of clouds. These then scroll steadily up to the top screen, turning your hastily sketched idea into videogame reality. Enemies can be captured in the bubbles formed by a quick circle of your stylus. It's creative, demanding and delightful – and encourages frequent replays as you figure out the perfect route.

Once safely at ground level, Baby Mario switches to Yoshi power. He trundles along, and you assist him by drawing cloud bridges, aiming his eggs with a tap of the stylus and encouraging him to jump on enemy heads. Building a cloud ladder to reach a cache of high-altitude coins, or firing a well-aimed egg high into the top screen is irresistibly enchanting.

Even if the finished *Touch And Go* does nothing but offer subtle variations on those two levels, it's still hard to see how it could be anything less than the definitive DS launch title. From the innovation on show, however, it seems likely there'll be even more to savour.









Future releases
A selection of confirmed titles

Animal Crossing DS
GoldenEye DS
Viewtiful Joe DS
Mario DS
FF: Crystal Chronicles
Bomberman
New Boktai game
Harvest Moon
New Team Ninja game
New Mana series game
New Dragon Quest game
New Sonic game
Puzzle Bobble
Mario Kart DS
Puyo Puyo Fever
Egg Monster Hero
Pokemon Diamond and Pearl
Final Fantasy III
Winning Eleven
Shin Sangokumuso
New 'Tales of' series game
Castlevania
LoZ: Four Swords DS
Vandal Hearts
Survival Kids
Shin Megami Tensei DS
Rakugaki Okuku (Pengel)
Frogger
Need For Speed Underground
Monster Farm
Survival Kids
Pac'n'Roll
Magical Vacation DS

Advance Wars DS

Still some way off, *Advance Wars* will bring a satisfying change of pace to a DS line-up currently dominated with quick-fix thrills. Taking full advantage of the twin screens, the game will give the top screen over to air units, keeping ground troops to the touchscreen. It's not yet clear how the controls will work, but it seems likely to exploit the touchscreen and stylus as much as possible. The story seems as strong as ever, with hints of star wars-style (Reagan, not Palpatine) weapon systems and old feuds. For those who worry that the GameCube's *Advance Wars: Under Fire* is a step too far away from the game's core appeal, the DS version looks to be the perfect antidote.





Pictochat

After a successful debut at E3, it was good to get a chance to see Pictochat in the 'wild', with no Nintendo police patrolling to eject anyone drawing genitalia or Sega characters. The results were as entertaining as you'd expect.





manufacturer committing to a future which isn't dependent on endless graphical inflation. Nintendo has taken a dramatic sideways step, and there's no question that it's a risky one. It's hard to see how the industry can survive – at least without becoming depressingly monolithic and conservative – unless others follow this lead. However, as the GameCube's life has shown, that developer support (or, perhaps more pertinently, publisher support) can only be guaranteed as long as the hardware has the market penetration to sustain it. It's one thing for Nintendo to demonstrate that it has delivered on its New Year promise of innovation and value; it's another to convince consumers to respond. Nintendo is sure they will: it has a million units waiting to ship in the US before Christmas and is confidentially predicting shortages. But there's no question that the DS is a tough sell. Its looks will count against it, having neither the sleek simplicity of the SP nor the aspirational futurism of the PSP. It's also a horror to explain to people – at least, it is in words. Sitting someone down in front of *Wario Ware* is the easy bit. Communicating twin-screen, touch-sensitive, microphone-input, wireless-ready, backwards-compatible gaming to someone

> There's no question that the DS is a tough sell. Its looks will count against it, having neither the sleek simplicity of the SP nor the futurism of the PSP

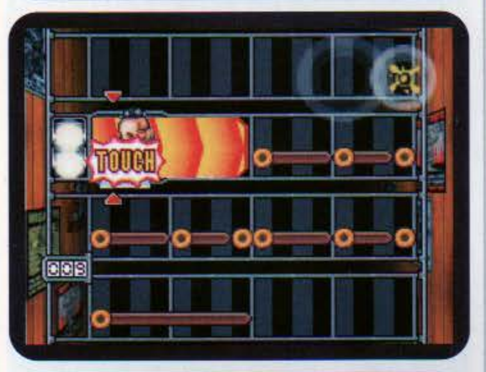


Dev DS ROMsets look a little like the units used back in the SNES's heyday

Jam With The Band/Band Bros

This very simply presented rhythm-action game supports up to eight players, all contributing a different instrument to the song. The 'touch' aspect is minimal, the game mostly requiring you to press a button in time with the scrolling display. This simple gameplay can then be edited, with a manuscript interface allowing you to write in new notes with the stylus. Voice samples can also be added, recorded via the DS's microphone.

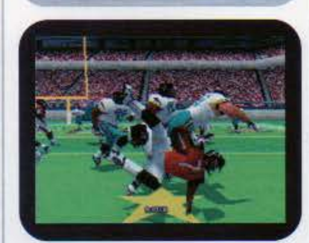
Altogether, the game can keep track of 128 instruments per track, and building up harmonies with your friends is enormously satisfying. So long as you don't need eight cartridges – and you shouldn't – this should be a delight.





Madden

A crucial part of the DS's US launch, *Madden* lends itself well to the DS. A 3D camera and a 2D overview communicate the action very clearly, and it's a bonus to be able to call genuinely secret plays during multiplayer.





Meteos

This isn't *Rez 2*, despite being devised by Mizuguchi. Use the stylus to drag the blocks to make matching lines – these then turn into rockets and launch the blocks above them into space – dumping them on to your opponent's screen.





Metroid Prime Hunters: First Hunt

Hunters raised more eyebrows than it dropped jaws at E3, the stylus firing mode felt by many to be ill-advised. That system is now history, and in its place is a very classic, very precise FPS. Move with the stylus, strafe with the D-pad, fire with the left shoulder button, tap to jump – it's a clever adaptation of over ten years of PC FPS evolution, and it works very well on the handheld.

Graphically, *Hunters* is also impressive – manipulating a smooth, atmospheric 3D world without the slightest fuss. There's no point in criticising the functional appearance of the lower screen – this is purely a backdrop for your stylus to move on top of. Multiplayer set-up is easy and effective, and the levels included in this bundled demo offer (just about) enough variety to keep players satisfied until the full game debuts early next year.

Three singleplayer missions are also included for those who aren't attracted to the deathmatch. Two are simple but satisfying duck shoots in levels crawling with metroids, the third is a rather unexpected racing game – a time-trial course for your morph ball form to follow – which shows off the stylus's precision very well. All three are enjoyable diversions, but the point of the *First Hunt* trial is to introduce DS owners to the potential of wireless multiplayer as soon as possible, and the game provides every incentive to badger your friends into buying one too.

















who's never heard of the device before will test Nintendo's ad men to their limits.

They have, however, some unbeatable advantages. The price, for a start, is hard to argue against. And the timing is ideal: ready for Thanksgiving in the US, for Christmas in Japan, and for whenever long-suffering Europeans take advantage of its region-free nature and import (or early 2005 if you can wait that long for the official release). And it's this that is the DS's real advantage. It's here. It's ready. It works. At a time when interest in the handheld market is soaring, Nintendo has emerged as the company best able to take full and early advantage of it. What will happen when the PSP arrives, with its impressive roster, its extraordinary looks, its vast screen, its proprietary multimedia formats and its potentially disastrous battery, is hard to predict. It's still an irresistible prospect, commercially and critically, but at the moment that's all it is – a prospect. Nintendo promised second and delivered first. Sony has promised everything and is yet to deliver at all. When the PSP finally debuts, it may well face a bigger DS userbase than it expected.



Kicking ass and taking notes: an interview with Reggie Fils-Aime

Nintendo has been criticised in previous generations for having poorer thirdparty support than its competitors. The situation seems much stronger with the DS. How have you accomplished that?
We've accomplished that via a number of key initiatives. First, frankly, before the exposure of the DS at E3, we spent quite a bit of time with our licensees, sharing with them our vision for the DS. In addition, we've held developer conferences and we've had members of the NoA licensing group visit key western publishers all with the focus of helping them understand why this is such a significant initiative not only for Nintendo but in our view for the industry.

Is that a change from how Nintendo has managed things previously?
That's a great question, but one that I really can't answer, having only been with the company about a year. But I do know that as I came on board, one of the things that I pushed the NoA organisation towards was that we absolutely had to improve our ongoing relationships with our thirdparty publishers – meaning the amount of time that senior executives like myself spend with our key partners, the amount of information we share, and frankly, finding a meeting of the minds as to why their support is so critical for us and the types of things we could do to help them be successful as well.

You took the step of raising the question of the PSP's battery life in your address at the Gamers' Summit. Are you frustrated by the optimistic press response to the PSP?
I think that Sony has done a masterful job of creating excitement without showing a lot of substance, and by that I mean that it is very unclear whether they will launch in Japan this year or not. It is very unclear what their pricing will be, it's very unclear as to what their titles will be, it's very unclear as to its battery life and durability. It's also very unclear on how they propose to deliver on their grand idea of multifunctionality in terms of movies and audio playback. They've been able to get many in the press excited simply on the basis of a visual prototype of their device. In contrast, at E3 we showed real product and real demos, and yet many members of the press were taking shots at DS, so certainly I'm frustrated about that. Now, having said all that, our focus is to make the launch of DS as provocative and successful as we can, and we know that that's totally under our control. So one of the things that we've challenged my team to do is, you know, we need to stop focusing on what Sony might or might not do, and we need to move forward with our own plans.

What age range constitutes the core demographic for Nintendo DS? Are you actually interested in wooing older gamers and, if so, how do you intend to appeal to them?
From an Americas perspective, we're going after a prototypical 20-year-old, a consumer who's a bit older, who's looking for a bit more complexity in their gameplay. I personally believe that it's a little bit more challenging to deal with two screens – it's a little bit more challenging to utilise a touchscreen – and so in my view the DS is a product which will up-age the Nintendo franchise. And as I look at the launch line-up here in the Americas, that is also very strategically designed to up-age the brand and go after this 20-year-old consumer.

Is there a danger in stepping away from the perception of you as 'the fun company', 'the childlike company', 'the magical company', turning you into something that's more adult?
You know, I don't believe that those two ideas fight each other. So, said another way, we will always be the magical company, we will always the company to create ideas like *Donkey Konga* or *Pikmin 2*, to put Mario in unique situations like *Mario Pinball Land* [reviewed on p115]. The difference in my view is whether we are able to get that more provocative teenager or young adult to feel that the brand speaks to them, or whether they feel that it's something for their little brother. That to me is our challenge, and I see Nintendo able to reach that older teenager in what is still a very magical, very fun way.

What does the DS reveal about Nintendo's vision for the future of the home console?
What we are saying, and I passionately believe this, is that the future of gaming is about the interface and the innovation in the interface that we provide for gamers. That's what going to get the future gamers excited versus simply focusing on technology for technology's sake. So when we look at DS and the various input devices – touchscreen, voice activation, wireless, two screens – that's certainly a model for how we're thinking about our entire business. Just like how we look at the innovation around *Donkey Konga* and the bongos as an input device, that's how we see the future of gaming.

> "It was all about saying we ARE going to drive this business, we ARE going to be successful and we would love for you to come on board with us, but if not, y'know, then you'd better get the hell out of our way"

You've been at Nintendo a year now. What was your perspective of the company before you joined, and how has that changed?
You know, I have to say candidly I was a SNES consumer, I probably have every SNES game ever made – I play them with my children – I have an N64, I have competitor systems in my house – I'm unabashed to say that I've tried all the systems and I have good understanding of them all. I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm a gamer, but I certainly understand and enjoy playing games and have a passion for the industry.

So, as a Nintendo consumer, did you come on board with some things you wanted to change from your own experience of the company?
Absolutely. This demographic targeting issue is something that I walked in the door with very strong views about. The goal of creating new franchises and new genres and pushing the envelope in terms of innovation was something I walked in the door with. A passion to see Nintendo once again be at the top of this industry. Those were all things I walked in the door with.



"My name is Reggie. I'm about taking names, I'm about kicking ass." That line is probably quoted more than any of your other announcements this year. What made you decide to take that approach?
That presentation was a reflection of the vision that Nintendo has for how we move forward, as well as a reflection of my own competitive spirit and my own view for what's required to drive Nintendo into the future. I think, in all candour, part of the reason why that presentation sparked with the Nintendo fanbase so strongly is that the Nintendo fans have been waiting for a vision for how Nintendo can retake its rightful position at the top of this industry, for how the company could drive innovation and, frankly, how the company would be more aggressive and competitive in the marketplace, and I was fortunate enough to capture all of that in a handful of words.

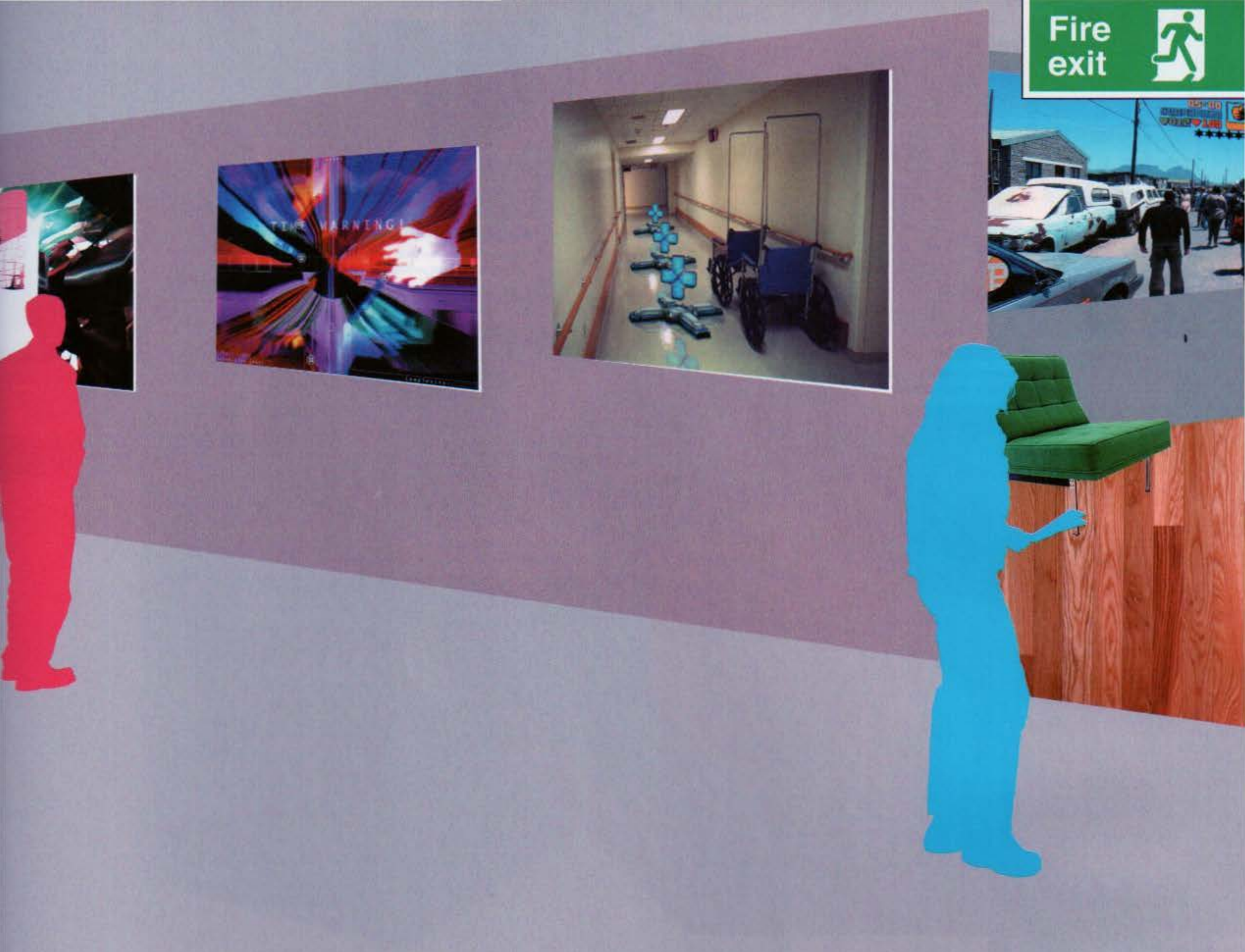
Did have any particular names and asses in mind?
Names to take and asses to kick? Well, yeah. [Hesitates] Well. Other than the other hardware manufacturers, it was really a statement to the industry, to the Nintendo fans and frankly to everyone who's associated with Nintendo, our employees, or licensees – it was all about saying we ARE going to drive this business, we ARE going to be successful and we would love for you to come on board with us, but if not, y'know, then you'd better get the hell out of our way.

At the start of each new generation talk always turns to the 'console wars'. What is winning for Nintendo?
Winning for us is, first, driving consumer satisfaction. Creating games and systems that excite our consumer base. Second, driving sales and driving our worldwide marketplace share is a key indication of winning for us. But, frankly, we have to do all that profitably. We know that at least one of our competitors is not all that beholden to delivering bottom-line profitability – they have the advantages of very deep pockets. We have to deliver profits, we are a gaming-focused company and that's why, in my view, the focus on innovation is so critical.

The DS has gone from prototype to market in less than a year. How has it been possible to get things moving so quickly?
In a large part it has been the development tools which we delivered to our licensees, and to the intense time that we spent with our licensees and thirdparty developers even before working systems were made available, to help them understand our vision. So, to use some American slang, we did a lot of spadework early on. That's what's made it possible to do what we've done.



But is *it*



is it art?

The debate is over. Videogames have become art. But not necessarily in ways anyone could have foreseen

In the pub and on internet forums an age-old argument is being played out: are games art? The question is as old as the games themselves and the discussion is bone dry, worthless and exhausted. Thankfully, there are a few people out there who are simply skipping the argument stage and are getting on with turning games into art, whether the pub-bound pontificators like it or not. But this isn't some cerebral exercise in talking up the aesthetics of *Tomb Raider*, rather it is a movement in which the raw materials of games, and the images associated with them, have become objects designed and made for galleries, exhibitions and the keen eyes of art patrons the world over.

Numerous game-inspired art exhibitions have appeared over the last year. From Los Angeles to New York to Rotterdam, the galleries are filled with the sounds of gurgling bleeps and the sight of unusual polygons. One of the most successful works was the Bang The



Waco Resurrection straddles political comment and tasteless voyeurism

Brody Condon's sculpture of id's tech chief John Carmack

Game art takes in a wide range of influences from various media

Game art is true multimedia, not simply a mix of audio and vision

The frightening live-action fight of Untitled War. Gallery deathmatch? Whatever next?

Anti-war decals have proliferated as impromptu level graffiti in *Counter-Strike*, but don't expect to see any of these works making it on to the walls of the Tate

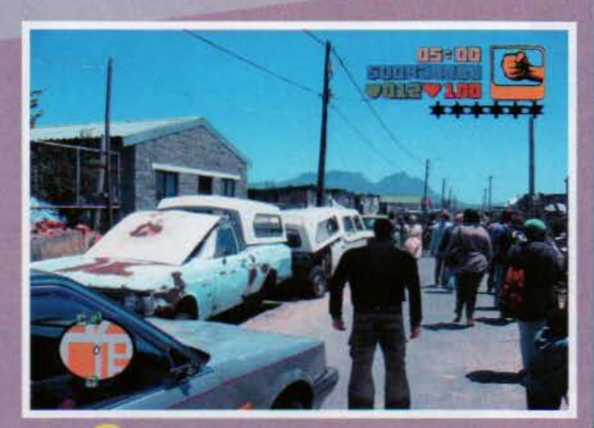
Machine exhibition at the Yerba Buena Centre in Los Angeles. Typical of this new wave of game art shows, the exhibition included exhibits such as a lemon tree that used acid battery power to run a selection of Game Boys; a replica of the Arts Centre that could be explored virtually in *The Sims Online*; a booth in which gallery walkers could (bizarrely) sit down and play the military PR tool *America's Army*; and a five-foot sculpture of *Doom* programmer John Carmack, based on his avatar from *Quake 3 Arena*.

The sculptor of Carmack's peculiar effigy was the Amsterdam- and LA-based artist **Brody Condon**. Condon has had a prolific and pioneering relationship with game art in the last few years. We talked to him about his experience with gallery based installations. First up, what was the Carmack statue all about? "Put simply, Carmack's passion for engine coding has influenced our culture in profound ways," says Condon. "Beyond a simple kind of hero worship, it's the form that thing has taken that is more important. It seemed perfect that the portrait of him be appropriated from one of the his own games. It was really around the time of *Quake 3* that this important phenomenon of 3D likenesses of actual people started to show up. Strangely, the evolution of realistic game spaces and individuals is loosely following the evolution of portraiture and landscape painting from the late Middle Ages into the Renaissance... [I] could get into this more, but [it's] probably too art historical."

Staying with the *Quake* theme, Condon points us in the direction of a UK-based game artist, **Tom Betts**, who's currently exhibiting game art and multimedia work. Betts is astonishingly creative, producing works such as a 3D web browser that allows him to create lavish visualisations of the net as well as an abstract sound sequencing game and numerous audio-visual applications. His latest piece is a *Quake 3* mod, *Q-Q-Q*. He tells us a little about how he made the mod and what it was meant to accomplish: "I took about ten arenas from *Quake 3* and modified lots of shader scripts and .pak files until each level was a unique psychedelic environment. The actual map files are unchanged so you can still log on to a server and join standard deathmatches. The resulting imagery is quite painterly and hypnotic with translucent architecture and ghostly players. When the piece gets shown in an art gallery it is linked to an internet server and you can watch the online players as they play. They don't actually know that they are part of the work, but they do get



While most games are made to look realistic, the mod scene breeds artistic alternatives



GTA as it will be in 2015? No, just another example of gaming in a spun-out context





Does turning *Counter-Strike* into an anti-war protest really make a difference?



John Carmack's work is showing up in galleries rather a lot. But perhaps even he wouldn't recognise this as being his

a free *Quake* server!" The success of these pieces has seen Betts exhibiting around the world (as this article went to press, he was returning from exhibiting his work at the Read Me/Run Me Software Festival in Denmark).

Like Betts, Condon takes inspiration directly from his gaming activities. The Carmack piece was just another example of his attitude towards appropriating game culture for artistic ends: "I took the 3D model from the game and altered it, which is how I generally work. I don't usually make new things, but operate on the level of creative consumption. Think about it: game mods, Lego, sampling and mixing, etc. We don't really create anything any more, we just consume creatively. It's a perfect example of how our culture has changed in the era of late capitalism."

Art has always been about expressing something about the world around us – appropriating aspects of culture and transforming them. Condon feels that games are the sphere in which he moves and so his art has to express that fact. "These days whenever I meet actual game developers, or speak at game conferences, I feel like a kind of Frankenstein's monster," he explains. "I've been playing their games my whole life, you know? And here I am, like the monster returning to the master that created it, arms outstretched, mumbling: 'Give my life meaning...'"

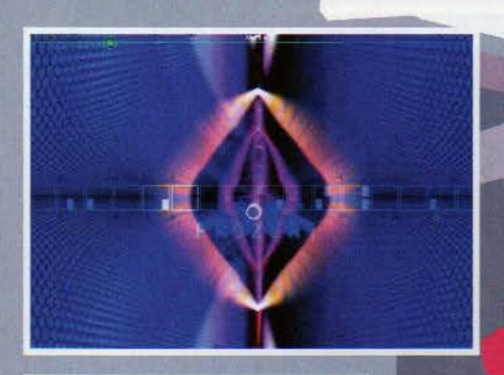
Condon's efforts to merge games with art have recently reached epic proportions. His live-action installation Untitled War saw a Californian battle re-enactment group, the Society For Creative Anachronism, duke it out in the manner of a firstperson shooter, fighting in full armour and sticking to the rules that define a ten-minute deathmatch. A blow was taken as a frag, at which point the participant would walk from the field, only to later respawn and rejoin the fight. The field of battle for this strange war was the Machine Project gallery in Echo Park, Los Angeles.

Condon muses on where the concept for a live-action battle in a gallery had originated. "I was at an SCA war in the desert outside Pheonix and I realised how completely crazy it was that we were fighting a fake medieval war in the desert, at the same time as we were in a war in the desert in Afghanistan," he says by way of explanation. "Also, their pseudo 'resurrection' and 'capture the flag' battles were very much like FPS games. The mixture of extreme sports, roleplaying, computer games and medieval reinactment was interesting. I have done performances in the past with hired security guards and, given the history of my other work, it was just a small step for me to have an exhibition of the SCA warriors fighting in a deathmatch-style battle, complete with spectator camera views projected in the space next door. I didn't know how it was supposed to be greeted, but at the very least it was a great battle and a good party."

Condon's mention of Afghanistan leads to another line of thought: art is often subversive and actively political. Game developers who see themselves as artists are likely to also see themselves as counter-cultural or at least making some kind of politicised commentary. This is the flipside of the relationship between games and art: rather than being mere gallery artifacts, games are being used to subvert their own normal commercial ends and make radical political statements.

> "These days whenever I meet actual game developers, or speak at game conferences, I feel like a kind of Frankenstein's monster"

One example of the actions of politically motivated gamers came about in the anti-war protest movement Velvet-Strike, in which *Counter-Strike*


AvSeq is a sound-sequencing game in which players create patterns and audio feedback


Exhibits like *AvSeq* redefine art, requiring skill to be seen at their best


LA's Yuerba Buena Arts Centre found itself recreated in *The Sims Online*


Q-Q-Q is a psychedelic mix of textures that takes its lead from a live server



Art exhibits that utilise game tools have the distinct advantage of often being interactive


Brody Condon's fake screenshots drop game logic into real-world environments, with some interesting results


A ragged coalition of textures and shapes, some game art tries hard to conceal its origins. A close look often reveals all...

players were encouraged to disrupt games in anti-war protests or, less annoyingly, to use the spray-can graphic in-game to graffiti anti-war messages across the map. The manifesto is intelligently outlined on the internet by artist and gamer Anne-Marie Schleiner (www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike). The site also plays host to the best of the anti-war decals and a selection of angry letters from a number of pro-war gamers.

Such a controversial subject has meant that the team would put at risk their livelihoods in game development if they were to reveal their identities

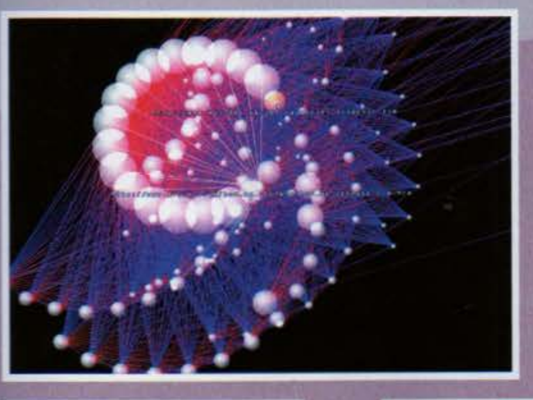
But Velvet-Strike was more political than artistic, despite its installation in a New York-based exhibition centre for the Killer Instinct Exhibition in 2003. A more balanced mix of the two forms can be found in *Escape From Woomera*, a *Half-Life* modification that attempts to raise gaming to the same level as mainstream art by generating an important commentary about Australian politics and the treatment of refugees in the Woomera detention camp. The mod, in which players take the role of prisoners escaping from the detention camp, can be downloaded from the website www.escapefromwoomera.org

The head of this modding project works under the pseudonym **Kipper** for contractual reasons. Such a controversial subject has meant that the team would put at risk their livelihoods in commercial game development if they were to reveal their identities. We ask Kipper why *Escape From Woomera* was so important.

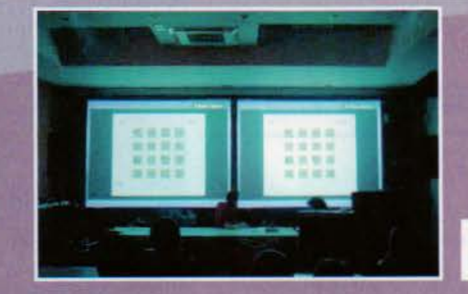
"Firstly, there are many artists using game technologies and game-culture material in their art. This is not where we're coming from. Most of us are not artists – we work as professional developers in the game industry, and we care about the state of games as an art form. Secondly, as Australian developers we're often forced to make games based on contemporary real-world events on the other side of the world, filled with pro-imperialist ideological content. We wanted to create a scenario that was significant to Australians, and give a voice to the kind of views that are almost totally unrepresented in gaming."

We ask what sort of reactions the team has received, thanks to its work. "Everything from the immigration minister making vague accusations about our project inciting people to criminal activity, to refugees in detention seeing us on the TV and cheering. But in between there have been elements who've said a game would trivialise the issue, just by virtue of being a game. The best reactions and we got tended to be from left-leaning gamers – they seemed to completely understand

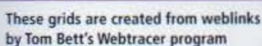




These grids are created from weblinks by Tom Bett's Webtracer program



Games are invading gallery spaces, though the UK has not yet seen a major exhibition





The detention-centre conditions of Woomera are recreated in a work from anonymous Australians

what we were trying to do and said things like, 'It's about time.'"

Being both game-makers and a political hot potato for Australia, the team looked unlikely to get funding for its project, but as Kipper explains, this didn't stop them trying: "We spent about two years talking to funding bodies and the Australia Council For The Arts was brave enough in the end to help us. The major stumbling block for arts and industry funding agencies were: a) it's not commercially viable, b) it's not art, c) it's political." Nevertheless, the Australia Council For The Arts was convinced to take that step, a move that might well set an example for arts funding bodies in other countries. The Arts Council Of Britain has so far dismissed tentative queries about mod funding but, with the right mod and enough pressure, things might rapidly change. Prospective mod developers will, of course, need to learn the lessons that *Escape From Woomera* taught Kipper and her team: "The federal government was so pissed about the funding they had an inquiry and threatened to strip the council of arts funding." Fortunately for both the council and the mod team, there were no legal grounds for the government action and they were forced to back down.

As examples such as *Escape From Woomera* and Condon's pitched battles demonstrate, art doesn't have to be a pickled cow in a tank. Condon argues that this meeting of forms, of gamer and artist, gives us a number of reasons to be cheerful about the future of our pastime and occupation: "One: it provides gamers, a group not usually interested in the art world, a reason to pay attention to art. Most importantly in my eyes, it offers interesting alternatives and strategies for using game dev materials for personal expression. Two: it gives games and games culture a kind of respect and legitimacy that they desire from the general public. Three: at a time in the industry when suddenly advancing the technology is not the problem, but the creation of powerful game content is, artists are the force that have the education and skill set to provide them with new conceptual strategies that go beyond attempting to mimic simple Hollywood drama and escapist pulp narratives."

Of course, there's still a lot of work to be done before mainstream games really begin to feel the impact of these more experimental developments. Neither the artists nor commercial developers have yet to find a suitable middleground, but with the emerging game art scene now starting to find its legs we can perhaps expect a bright future for cross-discipline development, with its produce filling both art galleries and gamestore shelves. Equally, serious critical art using game media suggests that games are mature enough to be taken seriously. Games are no longer, if indeed they ever have been, just flickering-screen novelties with nothing to say.

Five go arty

Five of the weirdest game art pieces from the last year

1 **Waco Resurrection – C-Level**

One of the most bizarre of the arthouse gaming installations was that undertaken by C-Level, an initiative to create radical game environments whose first project was a firstperson shooter based in the events surrounding the events at David Koresh's compound in Waco. Put on the Koresh helmet and experience the messianic visions.

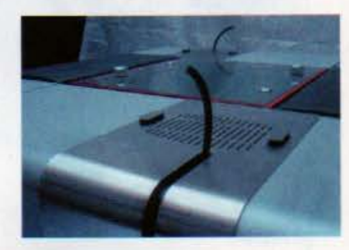
www.c-level.cc



2 **Painstation – Fur**

Far more frightening than anything that has come out of the C-Level experiments is the *Painstation*, or *Pong* with a twist. Losing a round means the winner can inflict whip, heat and electrical damage on their opponent. The legal implications of actual physical injuries have made more recent exhibitions of this machine a little more difficult.

www.painstation.de



3 **Chinatown – Brody Condon**

"It is common these days for commercial games to recreate actual spaces, but everything is still generic and sterile," says Condon of his self-playing *Half-Life* mod. "*Chinatown* is one example of my attempts to make game spaces that retain the specificity of their original environment, and deal with issues that relate to our lived experience within that space."

www.tmpspace.com



4 **Fluid – Fuchs & Eckermann**

Fluid is a meditation on themes of identity where the avatar slowly gains features via the actions of a player. An impressive *Unreal Tournament* mod, *Fluid* throws gamers into a weird psychedelic world designed by some rather spaced-sounding Germans. Impressive audiovisual installations have impressed and wowed art-going audiences.

www.to.or.at/~fuchs-eckermann



5 **Super Mario Cloud Portrait – Cory Archangel**

"I grew up as games grew up – from *Pong* to PS2. It's only natural that during my time in art school I'd eventually gravitate towards game materials and images, and wrap them around the experimental art strategies I was learning there." Archangel has created numerous game artworks, including *Super Mario Brothers* hacked to display just the scrolling clouds.

www.beigerecords.com/cory




Activisi

onaries

In 1979, Activision invented the concept of the thirdparty publisher. So, over the last 25 years, how has the company changed videogaming? And how has gaming changed Activision?

Open an Activision manual in 1980 and you were met with a photo of the game's developer, complete with a short note thanking you for buying the game and a few insider tips for getting the most out of it. Open an Activision manual in 2004 and you're greeted with a legal warning about photosensitive seizures. Times have changed, and Activision – sometimes with precocious vision, sometimes with mismanaged desperation – has changed with them.

In the beginning, it must have sounded like the set-up for a trade-magazine joke: four game programmers/designers fresh out of Atari together with an ex-music industry executive form a company to exclusively develop and publish videogames. The punchline was that it worked, with Activision's first few years of software production commanding the attention of a fledgling videogame industry and the blossoming home market alike.

"We knew we were building something new and unique with Activision – we were the fastest-growing company in the history of American business," recalls co-founder **David Crane**. "While riding that wave



David Crane now works with fellow Activision alumni at Skyworks (www.skyworks.com), creating free-to-play games subsidised by advertisers





we saw ourselves compared to other companies whose identities had become household names."

Activision's success story was written from a blank slate: where Atari's history dictated that much of its internal development involved cramming arcade titles into the 2600's humble architecture, Crane and his fellow designers could use its constraints to inspire game design, not curtail it: "We designed games that fitted the capabilities of the 2600, rather than trying to make the 2600 replicate an arcade game. Players could tell the difference, and that one idea probably contributed the most to the popularity of Activision games." If that was to make them popular, there was another element that would keep players returning to them again and again. (Well, two other elements, the second being the reward of badges of honour in return for photographs of stratospherically high scores.)

"A game had to be fun before it would leave the design lab," explains Crane. "That sounds obvious, but it's what many games from other companies in that era were missing, and that hurt the business. Within the design lab at Activision we all played each other's games until we felt they were the best they could be." As their own harshest critics, this process could veto even completed titles, but ensured an enviable record of quality through their 2600 catalogue.



Kathy Vrabeck, Activision's president, who previously oversaw global publishing and brand management, joined the company back in 1999

It would also see Activision produce a hugely successful movie licence in a climate where the concrete was still setting on that glut of *ET* cartridges – Crane's own *Ghostbusters*. "Making a good movie title is surprisingly simple: you make a successful game which could stand alone without the licence, and then marry it to the property." Crane observes. "Most movie games died due to a lack of development time. With *Ghostbusters*, I had a half-finished game that I could re-task, which gave me enough time to concentrate on making it play well."

The mid-'80s slump following the 2600's twilight found

"A game had to be fun before it would leave the design lab. It's what many games from other companies in that era were missing"

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS IN SIX PAGES

Activision's history mapped out via key titles since 1979



1982: Specifically designed for home hardware (although its sequel was, ironically, converted to coin-op form), *Pitfall* was a big early success



1982: Carol Shaw's instant classic was a broadside to the hull of an industry bewildered by the concept of a female game designer



1983: The Challenger was the American Dream, and Activision, being American dreamers, decided to coax a simulator out of the 2600



1984: Released on various 8bit machines, *HERO*, with its distinctive implementation of inertia and dark, sprawling levels, was ahead of its time









Activision – and the thirdparty providers that had sprouted in its wake – re-adjusting to the home computer market. "The 2600 was very well suited for reaction games, but the larger memory and long-term storage of home computers lent themselves to different kinds of games," says Crane. And Activision's games were very different, far ahead of their time in exploring and expanding player/game interaction, from the paranoiac *Hacker* titles to Crane's unsung *Sims* precursor *Little Computer People* to 'computer novel' *Portal*.

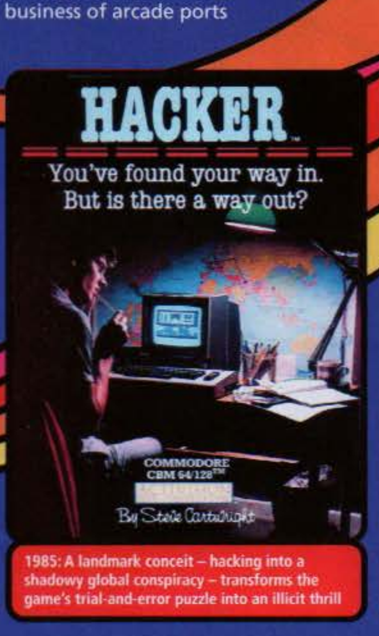
Though it was a period of creativity that few developers have matched, these titles would not find the same runaway success as the games of the console boom, and planned continuations of *LCP* and *Portal* were shelved. "It's not so much that the market wasn't ready for experimental titles – it simply wasn't big enough to support them," says Crane. "Experiences like *LCP* were very well received, but very well received by a small percentage of the market. Later, the market grew enough that you could make a commercially viable product appealing only to that small percentage."

In 1986, Activision would cross paths with another fiercely independent creator struggling with a changing market: text-adventure giant Infocom, which was reeling from a failed attempt to expand into the business sector. The merger between the two should have been more than a marriage of convenience, but relations broke down as founding staff drifted away from both, finding their companies' directions squandered. Crane, along with the last of the original cadre of designers, would leave his company a year later. "Activision's management at the time had no creative vision at all," he explains. "I left when I could no longer affect the future of the company."

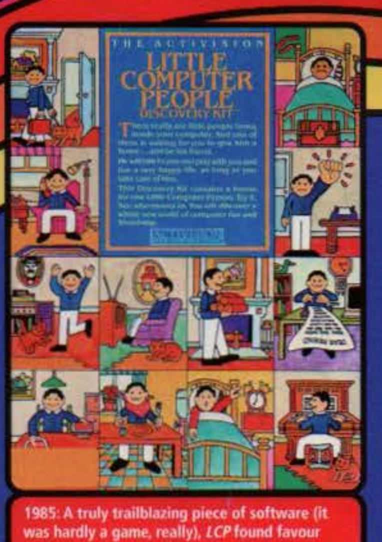
That future would show little indication of learning from the past. The company sidelined the Activision name to become Mediagenic, signifying an intent to produce business software in addition to games – a change of focus which would prove as misguided as it had for Infocom. Under Mediagenic, Activision was reduced to a product line resting heavily on the very business of arcade ports

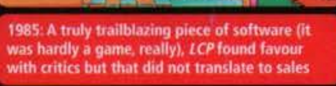


1984: The triumph of Crane's punchy action interpretation was in eschewing Venkman and co to let the player be the Ghostbusters

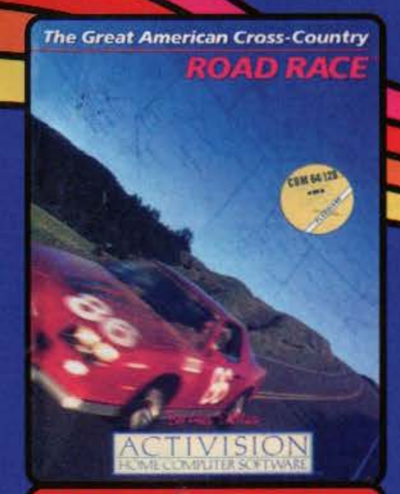


1985: A landmark conceit – hacking into a shadowy global conspiracy – transforms the game's trial-and-error puzzle into an illicit thrill



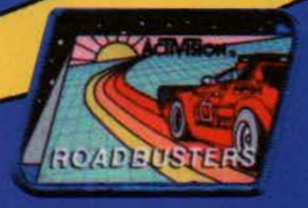


1985: A truly trailblazing piece of software (it was hardly a game, really), *LCP* found favour with critics but that did not translate to sales



1985: Though its long-distance driving echoed the 2600's *Enduro*, the continental context gave players the chance to live that road-trip dream







that had dissatisfied the founders (and the players of their games) ten years earlier. And its re-release of *The Manhole* as 'the first interactive entertainment product on CD-ROM' guaranteed it an historical footnote, but not a market, with CD-ROM technology still far from commonplace.

Though the Mediagenic years were not without notable successes, such as the three BattleTech licensed games, they would be overshadowed by the continued disintegration of both Infocom – which all but closed down along with its Boston headquarters in 1989 – and of the company itself. Despite successive cost-cutting staff layoffs, Mediagenic was near-bankrupt by the start of the '90s, at which point it was bought out by investment company BHK Corporation: the vestiges of Mediagenic would file for Chapter 11, that now-infamous Orwellian swansong for American publishers, in January 1992. The new management reinstated the Activision name, gathered up the pieces, and took them to Hollywood.

Something less than a shadow of its former self – "When it was moved to Los Angeles there were only three employees left on the payroll," Crane notes – this third incarnation of Activision faced the new decade bloody-nosed, a stark contrast to its starry-eyed entrance into the previous one. No less determined, though, it set about re-establishing itself within the PC market, with *Return To Zork*'s savvy proposition of FMV spectacle and nostalgia finding commercial success and, critically, media attention. The troubled in-house development of *MechWarrior 2* would redeem itself upon its long-overdue release by becoming another major success.

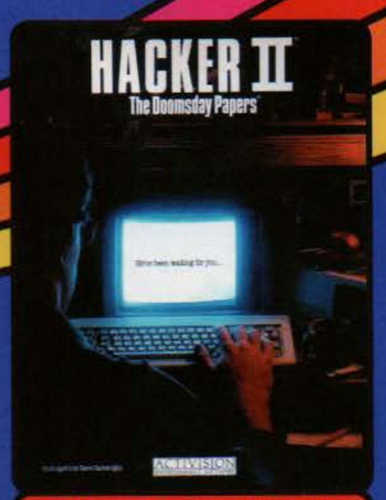
But as the 32bit era loomed, Activision was becoming increasingly aware that a shift back to console gaming would be crucial for its continued growth. After trying a number of approaches – converting its successful PC titles (such as *Civilisation 2* and an 'arcade version' of *MechWarrior 2*) or forging alliances with its new Hollywood



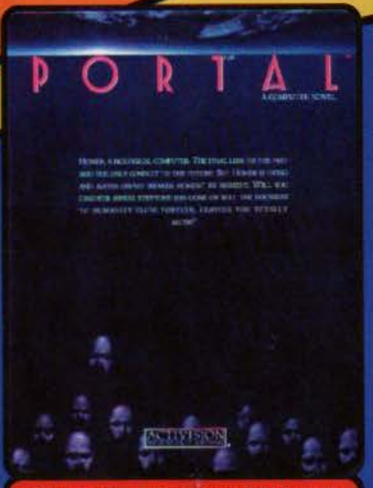
1987: Created by a fledgling Westwood, this compelling tactical RPG offered hours of Kurita soldier-stomping and a maddening endgame



1986: A psychology experiment with a GUI, this opportunity to guide a virtual life from birth to death was released in male and female versions



1986: A more sober, and brainy, affair than the first, involving frantic security-camera feed-splicing to remotely infiltrate a Soviet facility



1986: Rob Swigert provides one of the best sci-fi stories ever to grace a monitor, but *Portal*'s interactive narration was just as impressive



1989: The Miller brothers' abstract adventure, told in HyperCard, would set the unhurried, dreamlike tone for their later *Myst* universe









neighbours (with the ill-fated *Judge Dredd* and the Bruce Willis-fronted shooter *Apocalypse*), the company came to realise it was a journey best undertaken by skateboard. The proposition did not look as tempting in 1999 as it looks now: skateboarding was a marginalised pursuit and Tony Hawk far from a household name. What Neversoft crafted was a new kind of gaming, grafting old-school demands of dexterity and perseverance onto a crowd-pleasingly edgy and urban world. Its success, commercially and critically, re-established the Activision name.

Five years and six games later, the Tony Hawk brand has also come to represent a defining factor of the modern Activision – the reliance on licences.

Kathy Vrabeck, the company's president, is quick to correct that assumption: "Tony Hawk isn't a licence. We came up with that concept and then went out and attached an athlete to it. Last year, almost 100 per cent of our revenue came from original IP." But while it's true that original franchises – whether established, such as *Total War*, or burgeoning, such as *Call Of Duty* – make up an important component of the Activision roster, movie tie-ins have always underpinned its business. Star Wars to Shrek, Spider-Man to Toy Story – names that have a recognition even PlayStation would envy. Does Vrabeck think this licence dependence is a worry?

"Not from our perspective. The majority of people who game are much lighter users than the hardcore sector. They're still playing football,

"The majority of people who game are much lighter users than the hardcore sector. They're still playing football and watching television"



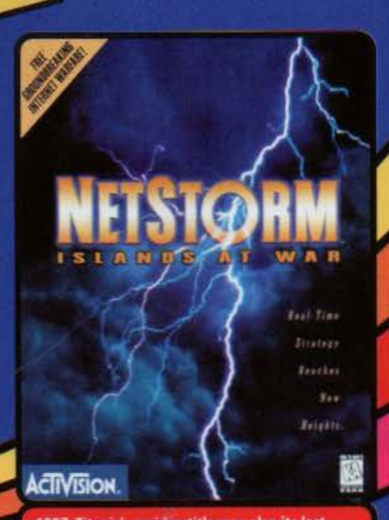
1989: Dynamix (later to create the *Starsiege* franchise for Sierra) produces an RPG/sim still seen by many as the definitive BattleTech title



1993: Though it bore only the most passing connection to the *Zork* universe, *RTZ* was the ubiquitous darling of the FMV generation



1995: Despite the loss of the original's between-mission maneuverings, the in-house *MechWarrior* is a memorably stark combat sim



1997: Titanic's maiden title was also its last – banking on net multiplay too early, it left the New Age *Rampart*-styled RTS an unsung delight

















watching television, going to the cinema and dating and they don't have time to research games very heavily – and they're looking at a very expensive purchase."

The solution Activision has found to court this market is to combine well-known brands and heavyweight titles that could attract more selective players. Vrabek is unconvinced by the notion of releasing more minority-interest games at the kind of lower prices that might encourage experimentation: "As of yet retailers and consumers haven't proven themselves sophisticated enough to

Having invented thirdparty development, blown it and then rebuilt it, Activision has now settled in to a new business model

marketing. "We're actually spending more on marketing than we spend on game development – it depends from game to game what that ratio looks like, but game development itself costs so much you hate to invest that much and then not have people know about the game," confirms Vrabeck.

Committing to such substantial mainstream marketing has lead to Activision's policy of cancellations of titles it felt were not guaranteed top sellers – original properties *Trinity* and *Dead Rush* have both fallen victim to the cull. Those that survive will be assured big advertising spends, but it's a policy that has no room for niche figure out how much value they're going to get from a specific game." It seems in Crane's era the market was sophisticated enough but too small; in Vrabeck's the market is big enough but not smart enough .

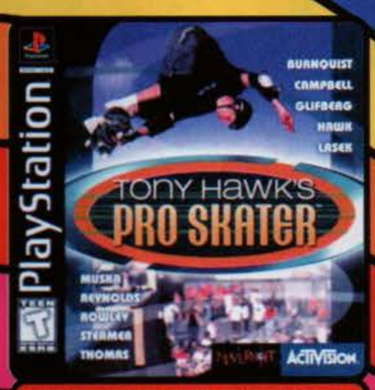
But while massmarket can equate to dumbing down (as evidenced by disappointments like *Spider-Man: The Movie* and *Indiana Jones: The Emperor's Tomb*), recent Activision history has seen a steady increase in quality and diversity. Having invented thirdparty development, blown it and then rebuilt it, Activision has now settled in to a new business model. By the mid-'90s, the company had again grown to a size which was atrophying internal creativity. Even teams working on successful games,



1997: The seared orange sky of Stroggos, the roar of the Big Gun, the meat factories: you always remember your first railgun frag



1998: This Cold War space war – from the team that would seed Pandemic – was a true return to form for '80s-era Activision creativity



1999: A strong candidate for a defining PS1 game, Hawk lent his name to a game that redefined a firm not known for its street smarts



2002: Lawrence Holland's Totally Games didn't quite repeat that *Tie Fighter* magic, but the firstperson bridge-stalking is still inspired



such as *Battlezone*, were starting to feel hemmed in.

"We found that managing all these teams within the building – with projects that were shutting down or finishing, moving people on to another team and then having to deal with all the corporate stuff they get caught up in – it wasn't working. So we spun out a lot of the teams." Vrabeck explains the decision lightly, but the supportive way in which Activision released frustrated teams was truly remarkable. Fledgling devcos could walk out with Activision funding, access to the IP they'd been working on and publishing deals guaranteed for the first few years of their life. For some it still wasn't enough to guarantee success. For others, like Pandemic, it saw them through a rocky start and established them as a major new creative force.

Nowadays, Activision has no pure in-house development. Instead, alongside its publishing deals, it pursues a policy of acquisition, often fully buying teams only after a successful commercial relationship has been proven (as with Neversoft, Grey Matter, Treyarch and Infinity Ward). "Now we've moved to a phase where we do have developers but they remain very independent," explains Vrabeck. "They keep their name, they keep their own buildings, and we take over some of the admin – payroll, employee benefits. We own them and so we have the advantages of not paying royalties and that kind of thing, but we let them manage themselves." It's one part of the Activision ideal to which the company has striven to stay true: the developer's name always makes the front of the box. Vrabeck is proud to assert that the company "very much values the developer part of the videogame model" – an old sentiment expressed in a disconcertingly modern manner.

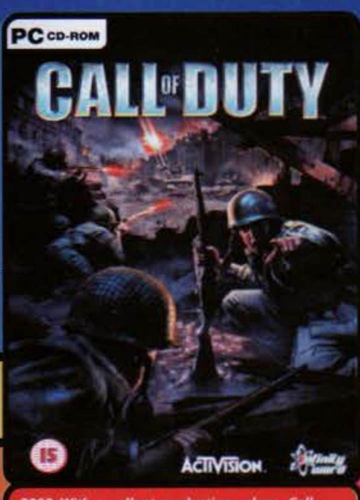
There are some things even a quarter-century of progress doesn't change – Activision has always been about profit. Crane is the first to admit that for all the nostalgic remembrances of his infant company, "we were a business in business to make money. We held to certain ideals, not for idealistic reasons, but because we had a vision as to how to make the best games. And the best games will sell best." These days, it's self-evident that the best games don't have that luxury, and Activision has only achieved its enormous success by adjusting to those new market conditions. For Crane, a bad game wouldn't sell, no matter how popular the licence attached to it was. For Vrabeck, a bad licence will kill a title, no matter how good the game is. For Crane, Activision was about enabling risk, for Vrabeck it's about minimising it. The challenge that Activision now faces is to nurture the creative independence of developers, while successfully managing the rising costs of communicating that creativity to an increasingly vast, increasingly distracted audience. It's a balance it's struck magnificently with *Rome: Total War*, which we review on page 104. The Creative Assembly has produced a title that is as remarkable for its gaming excellence as for its imaginative marketing: there could hardly be a better blueprint for gaming's next 25 years.







Activision badges courtesy of Atari-Age (www.atariage.com)



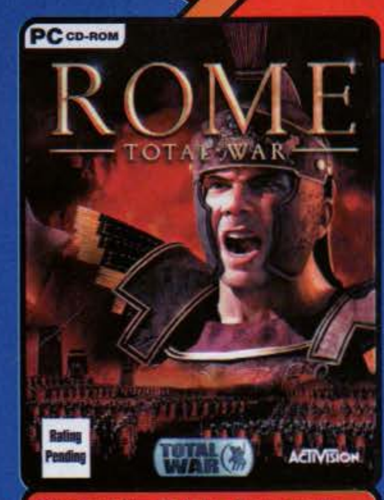
2003: With excellent production values, *Call Of Duty* was Infinity Ward showing the rest of the world how to do a WWII-themed shooter



2004: Treyarch proves licences are often at their best when capturing the essence of a character rather than copying the letter of the film



2004: If not quite The Third Coming predicted by its excitable fanbase, id's Martian ghost-train ride is still a satisfying popcorn shocker



2004: *Total Game* might be a fairer name. Its starring role in the BBC's Time Commanders has brought its brilliance to a new audience

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing...

Phantom Brave



It's simply bottomless, as Failure Dungeons and GREAT! gramophones reveal hidden strategic depths. Still frustrating but unquestionably fascinating.
PS2 (NIPPON ICHI)

Super Monkey Ball



It's been said before, but the cries of delight *SMB* can provoke from a first-time gamer, especially after a strike at bowling, are divine. Introduce someone yourself today.
GC (NINTENDO)

The Saga Of Ryzom



Two evenings, two new MMOs. In one you're attacked, mugged and insulted within seconds. In the other you're saved, befriended and amazed. The second one is *Ryzom*...
PC (NEVRAX)

The future is now
PC gaming cleans the slate



With *Half-Life 2*, Valve has marked the beginning of a new generation of videogames. You'll need to own a fairly hefty PC to play it, of course

This might be the most expensive issue of **Edge** you've ever bought. It may say it costs £4 on the cover, but it's very possible that buying it may in turn leave your pockets four figures lighter. And, believe it or not, that's a good thing.

Doom 3 may have carried a sting of disappointment, but its unquestionable power has drawn a line in the sand. We are entering a new era for PC gaming. Both *Half-Life 2* and *Rome: Total War* are exceptional games. Beautiful in a way that prizes aesthetic, mood and communication above empty technical achievement. Mature in a way that has nothing to do with headshots and thongs and everything to do with a medium finally finding its form. These are games that build on everything which has gone before, games that have learned from thousands of mistakes and studied hundreds of triumphs. Which is not to suggest that they're cadging a cheap leg-up – these are giants standing on the shoulders of dwarfs.

This point in the console cycle is always a strange time for gaming. Current hardware is plateauing, its true capabilities having been gradually discovered and exploited. Next-gen rumours are spreading, as early movies and hyperbolic press releases seep out there. Half the industry is saying it's going to be about graphics, the other half saying that's the one thing it can't be about any more. No one quite knows what's going to happen next. Or do they? The next few pages are likely to shake that feeling. Creative Assembly knows. Valve knows. PC owners know.

What's going to happen next is everything. *Rome* and *Half-Life 2* point the way to a future for games where nothing is too much trouble. They set an agenda that says games are free to tackle as much or as little as they like, but anything they tackle they have to perfect. Whether it's storytelling or character creation, historical accuracy or tactical depth, funnelled set-pieces or open-ended gameplay, real-world physics or forceful gunplay, games have to excel. The excuse that 'it's just a game' won't cut it any more. That's what next-gen means, and that's what *Rome* and *Half-Life 2* deliver.

So, if you're not a PC gamer, forget that £4. You may find it hard to get through the next few pages without preparing to splash out an awful lot more.



Edge's scoring system explained: 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



Ravensholme is littered with traps that can be used both to slay the ubiquitous zombies and to negotiate the streets and alleyways Freeman must traverse



HALF-LIFE 2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: TBC
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: VALVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E124, E125, E138

Firstperson shooters since *Half-Life*, at least on the PC, have been unsatisfying footnotes to the events of 1998. A smattering of ideas have crashlanded in the ballpark, but everyone is still playing the same game. We've seen better special effects, even some new material to work with, but there's still been a sense of deflation with each new title. Nothing on PCs has quite managed to repeat the fine melody with which *Half-Life* was orchestrated. But firstperson shooters haven't become outmoded, they've not even lost their way. They've simply not managed to do what we thought they could do. *Half-Life 2*, on the other hand, does *exactly* what we thought they could do. Those unrealised visions of intensity, action, drama and relentless challenge weren't just a figment – Valve knew that. The genre still has a way forward and the Seattle team has found it. Yes, it's a linear shooter: a magnificent, breathtaking paragon of the form. *Half-Life 2* takes the squad-based elements, the vehicles, the physics, the gorgeous good looks, the whole sedimentary block of genre conceits and carves out a masterpiece. This isn't about doing things differently to anyone else, it's about doing them *better*.

How is that possible? Well, it's largely about timing. The set-pieces are, almost without exception, supremely effective. A giant strider tripod crashing through a building, a zombie bursting from a door, a floating-barrel counterbalance puzzle, a duel with a helicopter, a line uttered by an otherwise inconsequential character – whatever it is, it comes barrelling in, pitch perfect to the very second of delivery. And it never stops. *Half-Life 2* never lets up; it's a high-bandwidth cascade of challenges. There is no time for repetition or monotony. The sheer urgency with which the player is propelled through the game sees to that. Few games have such a qualified sense of drama. *Half-Life 2* tells a story in which you are swept along without feeling helpless.

The intensity of chase scenes, the gut-wrenching loss of friends, the grim brutality of killing – all these experiences are delivered with astonishing vitality. The characters win hearts and raise suspicions. The acting, their movement, their facial expressions, all seem imbued with *humanity*. The city itself, awe-inspiring, oppressive and terrifying in equal measure, is flawlessly designed. You are *embedded* in this world.

And no, Gordon Freeman never speaks. No cut-scenes, no muttered voiceover. This seemingly sinister quirk is elegantly handled, gently transformed into a joke by the other characters. Alyx, the core female character, laughs and shakes her head, while Yoda-type aliens mutter things in their own language after informing the player, politely, that they would only ever speak in their native tongue if they wished to say something rude.

The cops don't have much time for chat and are eager to put a bullet in Freeman's hide. These early metrocops are pretty weak and work in numbers to be of any great threat



Graphical touches like this magnifying lens are typical of Valve's high standards of design and attention to detail



Barney never does get around to buying you that beer, but he does lead an effective coup against the totalitarian government. Without his help, Gordon Freeman would be completely helpless





Large sections of the game have squads following the player. Simple to manage, their chatter is charming and often sad





The striders are formidable foes and can't be beaten without rockets. They stalk players under cover, and will even bend down and try to climb into wrecked buildings

All of this brilliance takes place within a framework of sensational technical achievement. The Source engine might not have *Doom 3*'s fearsome lighting, but it nevertheless believably renders everything from a vast brutalist skyscraper to the peeling paint on a tenement wall. The striders, the towering tripedal robots that hunt the army of rebels along the streets, are wonderful to behold. Death occurs on numerous occasions simply from the awesome need to look and gape. Even in the large outdoor spaces, such as the high-speed journey along a temperate coastline, Source remains unfazed. There are a few examples of textures being too stretched and bland, but the naysayers who are liable to worry about that will have bigger things on their minds... such as the physics.



The striders, the tripedal robots, are wonderful to behold. Death occurs on numerous occasions simply from the awesome need to look and gape

Finally we have a game in which physics are more than just an excuse for ragdoll deaths. Gone is the Mr Magoo effect of running around banging into things and knocking them over. This time the world is there to be *grasped*. Within moments of *Half-Life 2*'s opening scenes a vicious metrocop throws a drink can on the floor and insists that you pick it up and put it in the bin. In that moment the player is equipped with everything they need to know about the world. And these moments continue – the game constantly teaches us something and then presents a challenge to be overcome by applying what has been learned. This is never more true than in using the gravity gun. This is the core tool, and it's what makes *Half-Life 2* simply sing with entertainment. It can be used to drag objects, pick them up and carry them about. Its second mode can be used to drop, throw or smash them away. The applications for this spread wide indeed. Initially, it's about hurling metal discs through the bodies of encroaching zombies; later it finds an application knocking over the buggy and getting it upright, or dislodging weird sticky mines, or picking up a filing cabinet to use as a shield or a battering ram. Tearing a radiator from a wall and using it to swat a parasitic headcrab, while all the furniture in a room goes tumbling around you, is truly a gaming epiphany. This is possibly the most exquisitely crafted action game of all time.

Half-Life 2 is a firstperson shooter. But in action, storytelling, technical achievement, atmosphere and intensity it has far outdone its peers. Valve just hit the top note no other PC game developer could reach. **[10]**

Walk the Dog



Half-Life 2 **mixes AI and scripted sequences to create believable behaviour. Chief among these are the sections involving combat robot Dog. Initially it teaches you about physics and the gravity gun, and later goes on to fight Combine troops in the most spectacular manner. Animation is one of *Half-Life 2*'s most superlative-defying elements, particularly with the human characters. This attention to the nuances of movement manages to imbue Dog with genuinely cute canine charm, despite being a giant cyclopean mech-ape.**



ROME: TOTAL WAR

FORMAT: PC PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY
PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW PREVIOUSLY IN: E120, E126, E138



***Rome*'s biggest revolution over its forebears is its replacement of the rigid chessboard map with free-roaming armies and porous borders between territories**

Gaming is a peculiarly megalomaniac experience. We love to control, to expand, to conquer, to grow; to see our mastery of a game result in ever-increasing power. Rarely, if ever, has this passion been fuelled or sated so fully as by *Rome*, Creative Assembly's third in its magnificent triumvirate of *Total War* titles. Whether you wish to term it a wargame, and thus crown a new king of the hex-based titles that lie far back in *Total War*'s lineage, or a realtime strategy, and so make modern *Command & Conquer* clones look childish, or even pit it against *Civilisation*'s pedantic, turn-based, crumbling might, it makes no odds: *Rome: Total War* is more compelling, more beautiful and more expansive than anything that has gone before.

But don't think for a moment that *Rome: Total War* owes less than its very being to all these and more – it is simply that rare beast, a game that combines its influences effortlessly and stylishly. From the turn-based legends comes *Total War*'s campaign map, divided into six-month turns. From the hexagonal historicals, the division of a world map into regions. And from the realtime revolution, the spectacular, elephantine battle scenes that art editors like to splash across magazine spreads. *Total War* seems to have found its natural home in the evocative era of ancient Rome, with its power struggles, far-reaching campaigns, epic scale, intrigue and variety. A gamer turned on by management or generalship alike can't help but be excited by the prospect of controlling the legions of Rome, and indeed Rome itself.

Rome: Total War is as complex and sprawling as that ancient metropolis. The greatest revolution for devotees of the series is that the all-important campaign map is no longer traversed by armies or characters one region at a time, like a chessboard. Every unit has a movement allowance, and also a threat range; now geography comes into play, as a Roman army in northern Italy can defend against the barbarian hordes by lurking in Alpine passes – not simply parking itself in the comfort of a city and waiting for a siege. Commanders' strategic awareness and skill are tested at every level.





It looks chaotic, but there are many factors in play here. Experience, weapon quality and the location of friendly units will affect this fight's outcome, not just weight of numbers





Whichever faction you take control of, you effectively assume command of an extended family of generals, bureaucrats, wives and heirs

Wargames can often seem impersonal, and *Rome* counters this with the introduction of a family tree. Whichever faction you take control of – at the outset, only the three Roman families can be selected, but defeating enemies such as the Gauls, Egyptians, Britons and several more in a campaign will unlock them for a later game – you effectively assume command of an extended family of generals, bureaucrats, wives and heirs. Every male in your family tree develops a retinue and array of traits which affect their usefulness in certain situations: skilled at attacking, say, or honest accounting. Cities must be more carefully managed than ever before. Employing a *Civ*-like system of affecting factors, *Rome* demands that you carefully balance a city's happiness, productivity and growth: a recently conquered settlement might need to feel the iron fist of Rome to prevent it revolting, while a small but happy town would prosper from gentle encouragement. Assisting in this, a personality can be allocated to govern a city if their natural skills advise against using them on the battlefield. If one's not available, you'll have to rely on the rather sketchy auto-management feature. Of course, leaders' skills develop over time – even a callow youth will develop battlefield advantages if you direct him to martial success.

As before in the *Total War* games, manoeuvring the armies built up in your developing cities on to the campaign map inevitably results in open conflict. But this is more subtle than ever before: the camera almost literally zooms into the campaign







A besieging army must aim to breach the walls – battering rams, ladders, sap points, towers and trebuchets are your tools – and then take the town square. Sounds simple

Elephants are hugely powerful units only available to the Carthage faction and occasionally as mercenaries. The downside is that if they take too much damage, they're prone to run riot and steamroller anything in their way





Two tribes



***Rome*'s campaign map is where it all happens, where Creative Assembly has laboured hardest, and where you'll spend most of your time. Here you can see a small Egyptian city's details, including the governor, construction options and its garrison. The Seleucids to the north are threatening its borders though they're being beaten back, while spies and assassins infiltrate their cities and territory. Take away the spectacular battles, and *Rome* would still stand proud as a fine strategy title.**



Any missile weapon, be it bow or trebuchet, can elect to fire flaming ammunition, which results in fewer casualties but the chance of routing a well-hit enemy

map to present a very real battlefield. Now, the precise position of your army or armies on the map informs the set-up of the battle. This direct translation of high-level strategic manoeuvring can mean a cunning gamer can gain advantages: positioning a second, supporting army within the threat range of invaders, or gaining the edge in terms of high ground. All of which is to say nothing of the visual majesty of these clashes: it's easy to see why the BBC and the History Channel selected this engine for television.

At this sharp end of the game, there's more to be enjoyed than slick graphics. The battles are more rewarding than ever, because units' unique abilities are better represented. Use any unit appropriately and you'll gain an edge: spearmen versus cavalry, cavalry against swordsmen, swordsmen against spearmen. It sounds facile, but it's surprising how often lesser games pointlessly muddy this basic scissors-paper-stone motif, reducing it to a matter of guesswork and luck. Here, superior generalship achieves results, although on the rare occasions your army is joined by an allied force, AI generals often lack basic military skills, infuriatingly sacrificing themselves and their troops.

Your aim, as commander of any faction, is naturally to conquer Rome itself. As a Roman faction, eventually your power will grow so far that the Senate begins to distrust you, and declares war. Battling the other Roman factions brings a powerful new challenge to the endgame, and a delicious final battle if you can engineer it: all your siege skills brought to bear on Rome's walls.

But such an ambitious campaign will take weeks – more, if you fight every battle and eschew the auto-resolve function. And that's just with one faction: try the remote, horse-riding Parthians, the screaming hordes of the Britons or the powerful Egyptians for a very different challenge, and to see that there are months of play here, notwithstanding the historical battles and multiplayer scraps. *Rome*'s breadth is as impressive as its attention to detail – it's a huge game of seemingly endless features, but one in which very little has been left to chance. **[9]**





An exchange of missile fire typically precedes close-up hostilities. Specialised units and unique types for each faction mean battles are rarely predictable affairs, rewarding a tactical appreciation of strengths and weaknesses. Better read up on your Sun Tzu

TRIBES: VENGEANCE

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E139





Peppering the flag point with spinfusor fire will blast any defenders from their perch, allowing a teammate to swoop in and away before the inevitable return salvo





Like the Covenant's sword, the energy blade is devastating up close. Its use in multiplayer needs skill, as opponents can jet away at any moment

The few clans organised enough to gather around *Battlefield: 1942* discovered a neat trick. At the start of the match, they could rush far-flung capture points if a couple of daredevil troopers hopped on to the wings of a B-29 bomber and, precariously balanced, wing-walked their way across the skies. With a simple tap of F9, their parachutes would open and they'd drop into enemy territory. It's an exploit, but it's a *fun* exploit.

Spend time with *Tribes: Vengeance* and you come away with much the same feeling. The game is imbued with possibility. The toolset might be small but the options, and the chances for players to go from quite skilled to online ninja, are enormous. While there's obvious pleasure in learning the perfect mortar arc, the inclusion of a grappling hook fills the mind with options. Fire it out at any point and it will immediately latch on to any surface. There are no special cases, so you can catch a lift with a passing bomber, dangling from its behind, or just use it to drag an enemy flag runner to the



ground. For others, it's the sniper rifle: taking out pilots from afar, jetting up into the sky and hijacking their vehicle before it hits the ground. Make a plan. Execute it.

Sitting somewhere between *Quake 3* and *Thrust*, *Tribes* is a real oddity. It's essentially two games split in half; an excellent online multiplayer option and an extended singleplayer storyline that veers wildly from mediocre to outstanding in the space of a couple of levels. The opening sections are dire – a series of scripted run-and-gun corridor missions set in a burning ship, they're claustrophobic, slow, cumbersome and the very antithesis of the previous *Tribes* games. Out of doors, it gets better; there's a marvellous sensation of space as you realise







This tribal warrior acts as your escort for the first outdoor mission. He's well-armed and intelligent, clearing a path through the local penguin-like wildlife for your sadly underpowered character, but he never says a word

that these firstperson battles are to be fought in three dimensions. You can fly. And so can the AI. You jockey for position, firing your jets in short bursts, predicting where your opponent will be, holding off on firing until you're certain, absolutely certain, that your shells will connect.

It comes down to tactile response. The game encourages you to feel your way across the landscape, using the jetpacks to climb the peaks, then 'skiing' down the other side, throwing up a dust wake. Skiing was an exploit in the original *Tribes*, but has been elevated to fundamental game mechanic. Experienced players will see the potential inherent in geography: downslopes used to build momentum for the upward climb, using the fringe to launch up, up and away.

And, as your experience with the tools grows, so do your options. The most intriguing singleplayer missions are set up as playgrounds, four or more objectives within a couple of square kilometres of open terrain and a free reign on what you tackle, when, and how. One infiltration mission sees you inserting a computer virus into three specific enemy subsystems: the radar, fixed gun emplacements and recharge points. Coopt each in turn, and their benefits are immediately transferred to you. Make another plan. Execute it.

The open levels are complemented by a wonderfully written, absolutely charming storyline. Every scenario is played from a different character's perspective, each highlighting their motivations and place within the wider universe. A bored, naïve princess; a lonely tribal leader; his lieutenant; a nine-year-old girl or a droid assassin. The dialogue is immediately engaging, the characters balanced and weirdly believable. And, while there's little of that gradual dawning that videogames do so well, story told through geography, the very fact you're playing these characters makes you feel for their fate.

And yet it can occasionally feel slightly primitive. The spinfusor disk is incorrectly sighted, for instance, just a little off in the Y-axis. Distracting. The ground-based vehicles, a buggy and a jet-propelled tank, don't carry the same sense of momentum as the rest of the game – there's almost too much friction between them and the ground. Take your finger off the forward key and they'll judder to a stop, rooted to the ground. Aggravating. Again, it needs to be said: the indoor missions are a letdown – ceilings simply get in the way. Disappointing.

But, out of doors, raining bubblegum-blue death from above like Icarus in iron trousers, none of that matters. All that's important is that feeling: of height, of speed and of possibility. **[7]**



Outside, raining bubblegum-blue death from above like Icarus in iron trousers, all that's important is that feeling: of height, of speed and of possibility

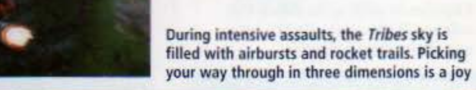
Steering medical supplies through an abandoned city is one of the set tasks. You steer, while an AI partner sends up a barrage of flak, bringing down attackers

Extending the universe



The embedded multiplayer is traditional; there's none of the capture-and-hold mechanic made fashionable by *BF:1942* or *UT2004*. Capture The Flag is wildly popular, yet the Fuel (rob resources from stationary refuelling dumps) and Ball (score goals by throwing a ball through your opponents goal) are gaining ground. That's likely to change – Irrational is promising extensive mod support, to the extent that commercially sanctioned mod projects already exist. *Starsiege: 2945* aims to add the Hercs (massive mechanical walkers) of previous games in the series, alongside the traditional vehicles and infantry. The *Tribes* community has remained wildly faithful since the original game's release back in 1999: if they adopt this, expect a barrage of further mods and total conversions.





During intensive assaults, the *Tribes* sky is filled with airbursts and rocket trails. Picking your way through in three dimensions is a joy





MONSTER HUNTER

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PRICE: $50 (£40) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), APRIL 2005 (UK)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E128, E130, E138



Though maps are split into compartmentalised 'rooms', the gameworld is gorgeously rendered and lushly populated, with photorealistic backgrounds that are as alive as the playable areas

Making online PALs



Having taken a drubbing over *Resident Evil: Outbreak*'s offline status for PAL players, Capcom is taking no chances with *Monster Hunter* and has recently embarked on a 5,000-player online beta test of the game in Europe. Since the purpose of the test is to identify any technical problems in the system, it's not currently willing to make any guarantees, but it's a good indication of its determination to bring the full online *Monster Hunter* experience to Europe next spring. Aware that the offline section game isn't a realistic commercial prospect, Capcom is willing to delay the release if it's necessary to iron out the online aspect.

Given a cursory glance, it seems easy to pigeonhole *Monster Hunter* as a 'me-too' online RPG – connect to a hub world and find three fellow hunters with whom to quest – but this is a game that swiftly sets itself apart. If there's one lesson it sets out to teach, it's that no man can stand alone. The game's major achievement is an emphasis less on personal advancement, but rather on working as a cohesive unit to achieve your collective goal – the hunting of monsters, truly absurdly monstrous monsters.

Structurally, the game reinforces this message. Experience points are not awarded on a per-kill basis, but rather upon successful completion of a quest. This means no single person can hoard the glory and that all hunters have a vested interest in seeing their teammates succeed, since each death cuts the mission bounty by a third. Once you've succeeded, the spoils of the hunt aren't distributed by a mad scramble or arbitrary die toss: members work together to carve up the physical remains of the beasts into bones, scales, hides, and claws. These, along with ores mined in the levels and other post-quest rewards, can be used in town to create and upgrade weapons and armour as far as your Hunter Rank will allow.



Monsters move about the map at all times, going about their daily business, and have a specific range of vision. Should you stumble across one, keep your distance, creep in the brush, and you might make it out without being spotted

A dizzying line-up of equipment upgrades and options awaits you, but you may want to consult a guide before making any big purchases. Truly humiliating and unheroic combinations lie within



As but one example of the game's copious comic relief, once spotted by a monster (as indicated by the half-serpent eye next to your name), the running animation changes from relaxed trot to flailing, panicked, all-knees-and-elbows sprint

Attacks are unleashed solely by the right analogue stick, various directions applying to different swings in the case of blademasters, or with a click to fire and holding back to reload for gunners. This approach initially feels staggering and awkward as you flail one over-extended swing at a time, but eventually gives way to the discovery of near-limitless combos delivering a steady relentless attack. With no lock-on for your targets, the camera can at first be a hindrance at the worst of all possible moments, but learning to compensate with the D-pad or L1 to refocus your attack is an art that comes with experience.

Capcom's decision not to include voice chat does means that heat-of-battle communications beyond 'RUN!' are quite limited. A click of the left analogue stick will send an SOS beacon alerting your crew that you require immediate attention, but otherwise this limitation requires nearly all of the tactical planning to be carried out before beginning the quest. Skimp on this planning and a quest can be over in second, but get it right and you'll choreograph a protracted battle, luring your quarry into traps, dropping explosives – your party's swordsmen swinging wildly at the front and gunners firing from the rear. Plus inevitably having to give chase to the wounded creature as it flees halfway across the map.



The game's singleplayer mode is little more than tutorial and sideshow diversion for your online persona – fair warning to those without broadband access – but there's some real challenges to be had, like plucking a wyvern's egg from her nest while she sleeps just metres away

Monster Hunter is at its best when lurching you from confident domineering into sudden vulnerability with little more than the beating of approaching wings and a shadow looming overhead. It's an excellent exercise in humility and cooperation, and one that should not be passed by. **[8]**



BLOOD WILL TELL: OSAMU TEZUKA'S DORORO

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $40 (£23) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (PREVIOUSLY SEGA WOW)/RED ENT.
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E140

It's not intended as a criticism, but Wow was never one of Sega's more adventurous studios – making it all the more surprising that it would be tasked with producing a game from Tezuka's bizarre skew on the wandering samurai tale. Perhaps spurred on by Red's characteristically spectacular design flourishes or the sheer strength of that story, *Blood Will Tell* is a game that, in its determination to break the mould of Wow's past efforts, breaks itself.

Blood Will Tell is at its most successful with the simplistic on-rails action many expected, but it's also a point-and-slash adventure, a feudal *Metroid*, and (most unsuccessfully) a platformer, each element jostling for attention in a framework too simple to really support anything but that first one-track dynamic. And while the tale is timeless, the engine is already dated, forced to present scenes that long for widescreen majesty on a made-for-television budget.

The wonder isn't that it works at all, but that at its best moments it can work so well, with countless subtle nuances – the rhythmic drumming of bare feet across wooden floorboards, the convulsive recoil of a stricken demon – infusing the game with a sense of completeness even when it's so obviously threadbare with loose ends.

Most impressive is the sense of patchwork ronin Hyakkimaru's transformation from prosthetics to flesh-and-blood as each of his stolen body parts is reclaimed. Combat, initially as artificial as his sword-limbs, steadily develops through the course of the game until downing a hundred enemies in sequence becomes an instinctive dance of slides, backflips and flashing blades.

In contrast, his companion Dororo is underdeveloped: Dororo's solo sections never play up to his thiefly character, instead being a clumsy reworking of Hyakkimaru's game that makes combat a stilted chore and platforming far worse. When tagging along with Hyakkimaru in the main game, he's an almost insignificant presence – appreciating this, the game wisely doesn't require you to protect him (a fact you'll be thankful for in the boss fights, which usually prove too taxing for his rudimentary AI).

It's a sore point not just because of the limp mechanics, but because Dororo is immensely likeable, proving untrue the gaming adage of never working with sidekicks or children. The interplay between the two leads, both intended and imagined, provides a simple humanity leagues more engaging than the vacuous cool of other action titles, and that may provide reason enough to follow their journey to its bittersweet conclusion.

There are scores of tiny, surprising, memorable reasons to like *Blood Will Tell*, and one big reason not to: the game can't do them all justice. It's as likely to aggravate as to amaze, and even if you appreciate its peculiar magic there are sections where that magic is stretched so thin it's impossible not to fall out of its spell. This is a game both hugely worthy and hugely flawed, and neither can quite outweigh the other. **[6]**





Hyakkimaru's arm-blades gain in strength through constant use, in contrast to his swords, which have fixed levels and powers as they are collected throughout the game. Higher levels for both weapon types allow lengthier combo attacks



Though the quality of the localised script and dialogue is occasionally shaky, the story scenes still benefit from excellent direction, sharing the game's eye for emotional detail





A second player can assume control of Dororo in sections where both characters are present, but it's as undernourished as *Ico*'s twoplayer. Left wanting for design attention, he's simply not as compelling to play as Hyakkimaru

Who's the boss?





Each of the 48 fiends holding claim to Hyakkimaru's anatomy puts up a unique boss fight, with only a handful being palette-swapped versions of previous encounters. For all the creature design talent on display, there's a general lack of challenge – but the highlights are no less memorable for it, and the ultimate, 48th fiend (which players are unlikely to challenge on their first play, as all its brethren must first be located and defeated) provides a suitably marathon battle.





Player choices fit together like Russian dolls to create a persona. You must choose carefully if you intend playing for the 1,000+ hours some Japanese players have already clocked



Square Enix has been remarkably attentive in providing seasonal special events for players. The most recent, Summer Fest, saw a daily fireworks display, fishing competitions and some unique stealth questing opportunities

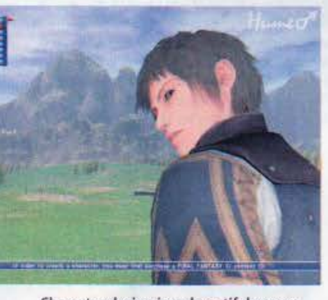


It will be some time before you can fly airships. Until then, a ferry service operates to a strict timetable, enabling pioneering players to skip continents. Occasionally, the ferry will be attacked by a hulking sea monster, which scours the ship for quaking passengers



FINAL FANTASY XI

FORMAT: PC, PS2 PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PRICE: PC: £25; PS2: $100 (£55) CONTAINS HARD DRIVE AND NETWORK ADAPTER
RELEASE: OUT NOW (UK PC AND US PS2), TBA (UK PS2) PREVIOUSLY IN: E107, E136



Character design is as beautiful as you would expect from Square. Many idle evenings can be spent eyeing yourself up

To crowbar even a superficial description of a perennial universe complete with its own diverse races, nations, laws, racial tensions, auction-houses, manufacturing guilds, fishing clubs, public transport networks and social interactions on to a printed page is asking too much. Functionally and socially, *FFXI*'s world is realised fully enough to inspire possible emigration from reality. In testament to this, a sombre warning at every startup urges players not to neglect friends, family and work commitments in favour of life in the world of Vana'diel.

The PAL gamer's two-year wait following *FFXI*'s Japanese release may have been painfully drawn out but, for Square Enix, this time has unfurled a runaway success story. Vana'diel's subscriber numbers now dwarf the likes of *Ultima* and *EverQuest*. But that is not to say that *FFXI* is radically different to the others. Generically, this is a shift from traditional *Final Fantasy* gameplay – a complete step into traditional MMORPG form and function, albeit told in the language and furnished with the trappings of *FF*'s familiar universes. So you are given a moogle for your *Animal Crossing*-style furnishable room; huge airships transport players from city to city; and hired chocobos race across landscapes that lower-level characters trek for hours to traverse. However, most of the core gameplay elements have been seen elsewhere before, and *FFXI*'s success has come from a complex cocktail of brand weight, considered execution and some masterful Japanese attention to detail.

Any MMORPG must stand on its online community, and *FFXI* cannily encourages player interaction throughout. While soloing enemies is repetitive, mindless and ultimately futile, joining a party reveals layers of delightful complexity. Here, a self-appointed leader must pull together a team of six people from the range of jobs available to players (initially one of six standard jobs, with nine further classes revealing themselves as you quest at later levels). A well-balanced party will consist of tanks (warriors), offensive and defensive mages and damage dealers (ninjas and samurai). The countless possible party concoctions mean every team must play to its strengths: an ill-managed group will stumble. It's possible to switch classes and level-up a different job at any time, and, at level 18, you can even add a sub-job, opening the dynamics (and character abilities) even wider. Outside of battle the game encourages clan mentality with its Linkshell groups. Linkshell members can be contacted at any time, and this encourages an invaluable community spirit.

FFXI may not technically be the future of MMORPGs, as there's no ignoring its derivative nature. However, it has cleverly assimilated all the elements that make the genre so popular and married them with international brand popularity well beyond the reach of other, more ghettoised MMORPGs. These games require a huge investment of time and resources from publisher and player alike, and, with a slew of new titles on the horizon, *FFXI* has, at least, vastly broadened the consumer pool. For most, real life permits just one MMORPG at a time: it will take a brave new world to provoke an exodus from this delivered promised land. **[8]**

Square-eyed synergy



After a few months playing the US PS2 version, it's good to see that the PC iteration runs in the exact same manner, the only difference being how a high-spec PC considerably beautifies the slightly ragged PS2 graphics. There's no distinction between PC or PS2 players online so the synergy is seamless, and this represents one of Square Enix's greatest triumphs in what is essentially the first cross-platform and cross-continent MMORPG. The latest add-on, *Chains Of Promathia*, delivers a surprisingly large amount of plot expansion as well as some spanking new vistas for higher-level players.



The five main races all specialise in different abilities. The tiny Tarutarus make expert mages, although their stylised Kawaii speech patterns will eventually grate with most



SLY 2: BAND OF THIEVES

FORMAT: PS2 PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SUCKER PUNCH
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCTOBER 29 PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E142

For whatever reason, Sly Raccoon – unlike wannabe-PS2-mascot stablemates Ratchet and Jak – has been afforded a gap year, a chance to twist and restructure himself in a far wilder and significant manner than just, say, a slick annual upgrade. And to some extent he's done just that, swapping the more funnelled, generic level-by-level progression of the original for a game set in a series of worlds that are as much a hub for overly elaborate heist scenarios (that veer from the tiresomely tenuous to the genuinely ingenious) as they are for more relaxed and freeform play. But *Sly 2*'s problem is that while it's shrugged off the plain partitioning of the original, it has, seemingly voluntarily, given the player some flatly dull and elongated goals to pursue.

There's nothing wrong with any given objective in *Sly 2* per se. In fact, the choice to allow the player to carve their own silent trail around each of the seven hub levels (each of which is an expansive spectacle to drink in, decked out in typically warm and chunky colours) in pursuit of their clearly marked goals seems, initially at least, to be an refreshing one. But there's a stifling dependence on making the player repeat the same act over and over in a barely remixed fashion. These thoughtless multi-part objectives – where doing something once is a joy, but being made to do it five more times across the level isn't – soon grind that fresh feeling of flexibility into something far more wearisome and hollow.

This self-restricting need to extend the game's lifespan through manual labour is *Sly 2*'s only major drawback, but it's a fundamental one. Otherwise, it's a game that bristles with confident control; its approach to stealth is still lightweight, but cleanly defined and all the more malleable and sure-footed for it. And, once again, Sucker Punch has crafted a game that glows with world-class animation, flawless audio design (from the bassy twangs attributed to your footsteps when you're inside the detection range of an enemy sentry, to the cheeky clink of a hidden 'clue' bottle) and boundless visual personality.

Sly 2's highest points are when it's at its most hectic and, ironically, most linear – those frenzied climaxes of each episode when all the strands of the heist come together, with control flicking between each of the three characters as they work to bring the masterplan to fruition. And its minigames and more novel goals are well-honed delights.

But that over-dependence on legwork throughout the bulk of each world robs the game of its sparkle, making it feel more work-ethic sweatshop than well-paced sweetshop. It's a masterpiece-in-waiting, so preoccupied with the petty crime of repetition that its variety and imagination are forced to remain in the small time. **[6]**



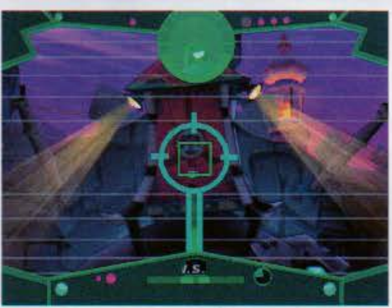
Multiple abilities for each character are up for grabs, very few of which are actually compulsory. But Sly's optional smoke cloud ability, for example, proves itself essential for making swift and easy getaways after being spotted



Spire jumps and the like allow for precise navigation of the game world. *Sly 2* is definitely a labour of love, but at times too much of that labour has been left for the player to endure



Both Murray and Bentley come into play as required during the missions. Murray gives players the chance to thump their way through the sentries without any concern for stealth, while Bentley can snipe with sleeping darts before placing explosives on the snoozing soon-to-be-corpse





One of the best – and, thankfully, most common – minigames is Bentley's hacking program that takes place in a virtual 2D shoot 'em up field. One stick moves your craft, while the other fires in whatever direction is required as you fend off the unrelenting waves of anti-virus craft while chipping away at protective walls

Wheels of steal



Of the few distractions, the most enjoyable is Sly's ability to pickpocket enemies by trailing behind them and hooking some swag out of their purses. The first few swipes will uncover a handful of coins, with the third and fourth attempts often turning up a valuable item. Once back at the gang's HQ, these can be sold off via Thiefnet, the game's 'online' portal, where such spoils can be converted into new abilities.

Despite having an arduous calibration system, *Puyo Pop* is one of the solidest games. The puyos respond to your body with perfect accuracy – bouncing off your arms and piling up in the crook of your neck







SEGA SUPERSTARS

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 (£40 WITH EYETOY)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E137, E140

Two moments best define *Sega Superstars*, and they happen straight after each other. The first is the moment – 60 seconds in – when *Nights* clicks and you honestly feel like you're flying. The second is the moment – 60 seconds after that – when the pain begins and you realised that the richness of Sega's back catalogue means a whole new repertoire of upper-body agony.

It's impossible to fault how irrepressible Sega has been in taking on the EyeToy challenge. All the company's icons, old and new, have been required to show up for this new kind of gaming PE, and they've all been asked to adapt, evolve or completely reinvent their gameplay to cope with camera control. So *Samba De Amigo* involves almost identical motions to the original, *Super Monkey Ball* moves from one-thumb control to no-thumb control, and *Puyo Pop* ditches being a puzzle game entirely and invents a new kind of juggling instead.

Some play mechanics are old, but enjoyably implemented, such as the bashing and dodging of *Virtua Fighter* and *House Of The Dead*. Other games such as *Nights* and *Super Monkey Ball* put you in a mini-control bubble, managing acceleration and tilt through the angle of your arms. These are subtler, but take more effort to master; even experienced players can find the controls lurching unexpectedly as they accidentally lose contact with the detection zone. Other games are simply bad ideas, poorly handled. The slap-happy controls for *Billy Hatcher* and *Chu Chu Rocket* are clumsy and exhausting, and while it's nice to see the EyeToy's microphone being used, hollering for a crazy taxi wears thin in a matter of seconds.

Structurally, the game is something of a disappointment. Each reinvented classic has a range of unlockable difficulty modes, but there's no preconfigured way to create the kind of multiplayer tournament that you're likely to want to construct. While it's slightly laudable that Sega has tried to move the EyeToy beyond being seen as a party game-only device, the singleplayer mode isn't sophisticated enough to compensate – there's no real sense of long-term progression or achievement as you hop from one minigame to the next. Victories do earn you rings, and these can be spent on in your chao garden on trinkets and treats for your blandly cute little pet. However, interaction here is also lacking and, in the end, it simply doesn't feel like much of a reward.

Sega has clearly been keeping an eye on Sony London, as *Superstars*' presentation is blindingly clean and crisp. However, it still falls prey to the menu-itis to which all EyeToy games seem prone. So the complaints that can be levelled against *Superstars* are real, but so is the magic it contains. When it works, *Monkey Ball* truly feels like you're tilting the land, not moving the ball. When it works, *Nights* makes you think you can fly.

EyeToy is at a stage at which its games need to be judged not on how close they come to perfection, but on whether or not they advance the potential of the hardware, and Sega has taken the device and pointed it in a very promising direction. **[7]**



Space Channel 5 veterans know that the only way to win is to groove while you play – now it's an essential tactic





The *Samba De Amigo* minigame is not very far from being a perfect port of the original – not including the minigames and Perfect challenges. The calibration can be very forgiving on easier levels, although this has the effect of actually making the game harder, as every move of your body sets off an audible chh-chh-chh of phantom maracas





Virtua Fighter (the demo screenshots show a boy playing instead of a girl, just in case anyone thought it was for sissies) is a devastatingly simply idea. Be ready for neck ache as you struggle to stand sideways and see the TV

Of the 12 main games, the destructive DIY is probably the weakest. The rest have a hit-to-miss ratio that would make other EyeToy games weak with jealousy

EYETOY: PLAY 2

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 (BUNDLE), £30 (SOLUS)
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 5 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: SONY LONDON STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E142

The first thing that becomes apparent when playing *Play 2* is that the people who made it have *done this before*. After a disappointing drought, there's been a deluge of EyeToy games over the last few months, but all have had a slight air of hesitant experimentation. *Play 2* really knows what it's doing.

The range of movements it calls upon you to produce is bigger than in the original, and their detection is more precise, a combination which opens up a much larger range of gaming possibilities. Air Guitar, possibly the game's strongest suit (something London Studio knows – it comes up preselected when you load the game) is exactly as it sounds. Thrash the strings with one hand, form flat Play-doh chords with the other: rock stance entirely optional. Bubble Pop is a first for EyeToy – a game of delicate restraint. Pop the clear bubbles and avoid the red. It should be simple but isn't, due to some calculatedly nasty level design. Soon you'll be contorted and sweating, but from tension rather from exertion.

Play 2 also mixes up the range of movements each game asks of you. Rather than a one-note task, repeated over and over, each game is split into levels with bosses and microgames breaking up the pace (and shifting the strain on to a fresh muscle group). Mr Chef has you filling orders in a restaurant, dragging burger ingredients on to a plate. Run out of anything and you'll trigger a microgame – pickle-slicing, milk-shaking or chip-salting. Hit a home run in the baseball game and you'll need to drop your improvised bat and run on the spot – arms pumping – to power your character round the bases. It's a very clever step, meaning that each game lasts longer than in the original *Play* but is less tiring and much more engaging.

Bubble Pop demonstrates perfectly how crucial good audio design is to an EyeToy game. Its later stages, where thousands of bubbles stream past as you try to squidge the clear ones and preserve the red ones, should qualify for the gaming hall of fame





Air Guitar is irresistible at its simplest, but once the 'slide' move comes into play even the shyest wallflower will find it hard to resist doing Mick Jagger's lips, and perhaps even Angus Young's legs

The Play Room is a range of diversions and special effects, including the magic wand system which was many people's first glimpse of EyeToy. These feel very much like experiments, although often the simpler (like a screen of swooshing colour which responds to a sound input) are more successful than the complicated (like the face-capture and morphing system, which is too cumbersome and slow to suit the software).

The presentation is as characterful as you would expect from London Studio, it's welcoming to newcomers to the EyeToy, or even to gaming in general, and the navigation system has been much improved, responding snappily to your commands. All in all, the studio's experience with the system shines through, and this is crucial. After all, it's not just the developer that's done this before – you have, too. The problem with a system so approachable and so instantly comprehensible is that everyone who touches an EyeToy thinks they're an expert. With *Play 2*, London Studio has shown us what expertise really looks like. **[8]**



It may wear its *Samba De Amigo* heritage rather clearly on its sleeve, but the pops, twonks and thumps of the virtual drum kit make you feel closer to a freeform jazz soloist than ever before. Nice



FLATOUT

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 5 PUBLISHER: EMPIRE INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: BUGBEAR PREVIOUSLY IN: E118, E132, E137

Burning rubbernecker



Extra special mention has to go to *FlatOut*'s bonus games, which take ragdoll physics to their giggling and slightly worrying conclusion. Among more standard events such as destruction derbies and figure-of-eight race mash-ups, there are gruesome Olympics (such as the long/high jump, and giant games of darts and skittles) that involve ejecting your drivers through the windscreen at the optimal moment (and angle) to get them to fly as far or as high as possible. Watching them twist and flop through the air is as hilarious a pleasure as it is a guilty one, before they plop down to the ground with a thud and a comical yelp. The lack of blood or damage to your driver helps keep it far less controversial than it might initially appear.

FlatOut is, quite literally, a breakthrough. While taking the first corner of your first race and inevitably overshooting, you pile into the roadside barriers expecting a harsh metallic crash as your vehicle meets an immovable object. But there isn't one. Instead, the barriers slide and tip, giving way. Wooden fences snap and splinter into planks. Stacks of tyres scatter over the track, turning it into a minefield of precarious cobbles and speed traps that can spell disaster for anyone travelling too fast.

FlatOut is a racing game with physics as a weapon, and the tumps of deliberate roadside props are your ammo. It's *Mario Kart* meets *Destruction Derby*: taking out the supporting struts of conveniently placed scaffolding will send barrels spilling all over the track like so many banana skins and green shells, as much a danger to you on subsequent laps as to your immediate rivals. It also encourages and rewards such destructive behaviour by giving you nitro boost in return for damage caused by your vehicle, making that risky detour into a pile of logs doubly tempting.

It's a moderately pretty game, too, brought alive as much by its physics-experiment nature as the slightly fuzzy filter that adorns the visuals, smoothing them somewhat without clogging up the visibility. There's little variety in the tracks, however, meaning that races swiftly begin to feel too samey, but the unpredictability of the house-of-cards setup of it all usually means that spillages, bottlenecks and emergent hazards rarely strike twice, which helps soothe the thematic repetition of the courses. It's a fact helped by some unforced AI behaviour, as rivals seem as susceptible to the whims of Newton's laws as you.

But it soon becomes clear that this is as much a curse as it is a blessing. Games that offer unpredictability and chaos inevitably frustrate when it comes to making progress in a well-paced manner. A single shunt from a rival, a pratfall from the driver in front, or just glancing a tyre stack at an unlucky angle on the final corner can send you into a disastrous crash that costs you any chance of a top-three position. The track reset that places you back on the course seems to be an equal lottery – at times it drops you generously close to the scene of your accident, at others it warps you right to the back of the pack.

This is a game that's as riotously entertaining as it is viciously random, but it's also one in which you soon begin to wish that your tools for chaos were more elaborate than the roadside equivalent of a pyramid of tins just waiting to be scattered for mischief. It's gleeful automobile slapstick, but not for anyone who values skill and achievement more than taking a wrecking ball to their opponents' racing lines. **[7]**

While *FlatOut* does feature joypad rumble, it's curiously limited to collisions, meaning that your vehicle seems strangely light when compared to the feel of cars in other recent racers









FlatOut isn't so much trapped between a rock and a hard place as a log and a barrel; the moshpit of impromptu chaos is a trade-off for being able to race without the threat of disaster striking at any moment of play







Vehicles can be upgraded simply, but you'll have to sell your car when purchasing a new, higher-level vehicle to take on the later races. Although untested at the time of writing, Xbox Live and System Link play also feature



SUPER MARIO BALL

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 26
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: FUSE GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138



The outsized sprites and chunky decoration give the impression of a crowded, busy environment. Most screens are too sparsely furnished, however, to create the rattling action pinball fans crave

It must take something special for the famously picky Nintendo to buy a pitch, on spec, from an unproven British startup – let alone one that bears the stamp of its flagship character. Faced with the finished *Super Mario Ball* (known Stateside as *Mario Pinball Land*, a prosaic title which nonetheless nails its boss-battling, puzzle-solving, themed adventure pinball) you have to ask: what persuaded the company?

Perhaps it was Fuse's command of the GBA, for there is convincing speed, solidity and depth to the compacted mascot's tumbles and rebounds around the pseudo-3D screens. Or maybe it was its artists; while some may find the prerendered gloss makes for a peculiarly charmless Mushroom Kingdom, there's no denying that the overall effect is impressively vivid, and respectably clear.

It could be that Nintendo saw imagination, cunning and humour in the fledgling developer. All are evident in the pinball-but-not concept, in the clever spatial structure and in the sly design of the star challenges on each screen. Or, just maybe, its head was turned by flattery, because *Mario Ball* is a touching love letter to *Mario 64*, quoting everything from the coins to the cannons, the sunken ship to the star-powered doors.

Whatever the reasons, they blinded Nintendo to one simple truth: like the close cousins they are, pinball and videogames shouldn't breed beyond mere mimicry. Replacing the subconscious chaos of the former with the rational furniture of the latter (objectives, routes, items) demands precision and a level of interaction that a set of flippers just can't provide. Luck plays a huge part, and simply navigating the world can be exactly as hard as the hardest challenge: a random, enraging, minutes-long bore, especially with moving enemies straying across your line.

Super Mario Ball might still have been a noble misconception (on a par with Sony's clever half-breed, *Flipnic*) were its basic flaw not inflamed by some woeful design choices, such as forcing stars earned to be picked up with a direct hit, or closing doors if they're all opened by accident. Maybe these little cruelties were intended to spin out its tiny lifespan by increasing its difficulty, but all they will do is gnaw away at your patience with what is a maddening, misguided mongrel of a game. **[4]**



An excruciating, but mercifully brief, intro movie dispenses with the cursory 'plot'. Even with your rosiest Nintendo glasses on, the blank-eyed, lifeless renders of Mario and friends seem to be doing nothing but going through the motions



PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 4

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's an odd one, this. *Pro Evolution Soccer 4* isn't that different from *Pro Evolution Soccer 3*, which is exactly the reason people damn and continue to damn Electronic Arts' *FIFA* series. The difference is that now – just as *FIFA* was, once – *Pro Evolution Soccer* is the best football franchise in the world. If *PES 3* was great, then *4* is greater still, and EA is left playing a desperate game of catch-up.

Although perhaps it's not that desperate. *Pro Evolution Soccer*, even in its fourth incarnation, is still a very difficult game to get to grips with; it's hard to feel the rhythm, the pace; it doesn't offer instant, instinctive glory like its rival. That's the payoff, because the effort put in at the start getting to grips with *PES*'s subtleties eventually produces a beautiful, flowing game of football that comes closer to approximating the real sport than ever before. That's not enough for mainstream success. Many people simply don't have the time.

Those who do will discover that the game has improved. It is fractionally better looking, there is now a referee, there are more teams to choose from and more of them have the correct names. And it feels better. It's difficult to define, but there are subtle changes to the dribbling and passing that give the game more weight. The ball bounces off players more realistically, and players make more intelligent runs off the ball. Master League mode is still the focus of singleplayer activity; the structure is the same as last time, but the player improvement system, in which the statistics of your players decline and fall according to a growth curve, revolutionises the way you approach it.

But that's only for the devoted; there's no way most would consider this a revolutionary update. Scores are particularly redundant here: whether or not *PES 4*'s worth it for you depends on how much you got from *Pro Evolution Soccer 3*, whether you're the sort of person who devotes lifetimes of evenings to Master League progress or whether you just like a kickaround between games of *Halo*. **[9]**



Another set of celebration animations have been recorded for *PES4*, along with routines for the (new) referee. Commentary is still abysmal, but that's less due to Peter Brackley than to clumsy and unimaginative hooks on the part of Konami



The PS2 version is reviewed here, but *PES4* is also coming to Xbox and Live. Buyers might want to invest in a DualShock adapter – the lack of twin triggers on the Xbox joypad is a problem



ADVANCE GUARDIAN HEROES

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $30 (£17)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: TREASURE PREVIOUSLY IN: E140

A little slowdown can go a long way, teasing out a boss explosion into a gratuitous money shot or increasing the player's chances of survival when the on-screen odds are so troublesome that even the processor is having trouble keeping up. And Treasure's designers as much as anyone else have taught us this.

But with *Advance Guardian Heroes* it's something that's been indulged in a little too liberally. Slowdown in this scrolling beat 'em up is copious, but not necessarily ruinous; it doesn't break the game – thanks to the counterattack system being so relaxed and accessible, fittingly so for the GBA – but the stuttering pace of the action does mean that you'll often feel like you're playing a poorly emulated piece of software that was conceived to run on something a bit more powerful.

Otherwise, outside of the awful dialogue localisation, things are solid. A decent combat system has been mapped on to the GBA's four buttons, cramming in combos, magic flurries and satisfying counters. While it doesn't pass as an update or a worthy torch bearer for the hyperactive, all-out action-clash that was the original *Guardian Heroes*, the resemblance is still there. It's more homage than successor, but it's a decent beat 'em up in its own right.

Some swish graphical tricks have been employed – notably, the second level's white-water rafting trip into the screen – possibly explaining away some of that prevalent slowdown that occurs even when things get even medium-busy.



Every time you die, you're given a choice: retry from the most recent restart point, or continue alive and invincible for a short period in return for your 'soul'. It's a function that allows you to continue on and study boss patterns, so that you're more clued-up the next time you play

It is, however, a little short. A register of unlockable characters and modes helps lessen the feeling of limitation somewhat, but it's a far cry from the 30-level-strong, carve-your-own-adventure setting of the Sega Saturn original.

Perhaps a more fitting title for the game would be *Retreat Guardian Heroes*, for all its steps backward when inevitably measured up against the mould-breaking original. Ignoring any weight of expectation, it remains a likeable fighting game thanks mostly to that simple, tactile countering system, but its brevity and abundant slowdown mean it's still not anywhere near as magnificent as the more-apt comparison that is Treasure's GBA Astro Boy title. **[6]**



By donating collected crystals to the laboratory, or finishing the unlockable Time Attack mode over and over, more than 20 characters become available to unlock. An arena-based rumble for up to four players is also featured



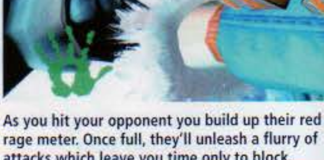
GAMETRAK: DARK WIND

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £70 INCLUDING GAMETRAK
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: IN2GAMES
DEVELOPER: ATOMIC PLANET PREVIOUSLY IN: E137, E140









As you hit your opponent you build up their red rage meter. Once full, they'll unleash a flurry of attacks which leave you time only to block. Players can gain more special attacks by crossing their arms in amusing, showy martial arts poses

Gametrak's inventors are determined that the device isn't a peripheral, it's a platform. When it's plugged into a PS2 (a PC version is planned), they claim it changes the console so dramatically that it becomes a new hybrid device for which none of the existing catalogue of games is suitable. Only Gametrak games will be playable with the Gametrak controller, which means that nothing else you've got on your shelves, and nothing else the shops have on their shelves, will recognise it. Until more Gametrak games become available (a golf title and a party game collection are planned), all you'll be playing is *Dark Wind*.

It has to be this way. Gametrak does a robust and precise job of converting your 3D movements into on-screen actions. Its makers claim an accuracy of up to a millimetre in a three-metre square, and although it doesn't feel like that as you flail and fudge your way through the first few fights, you're willing to chalk that up to your own learning curve rather than technical failings. The shock of moving your fist and seeing it connect with someone's face on screen is profound, and rather strangely delicious. Before long, you start to take the device so much for granted that you can't understand why your fingers don't animate on screen when you wiggle them. There's no question that Gametrak passes the thumping test with full honours.

What you'll be thumping is a fairly brief roster of typically unconventional characters. You can throw jabs, hooks and belly punches, taking advantage of the range of movement offered by the hardware. To dodge you'll need to follow prompts on the screen, covering the quadrant where the next blow is coming from. It feels a little crude, but it does break up the pace of the fights. Successfully blocking builds up your special attack meter and you'll need to strike poses – *Samba De Amigo* style – to unleash them. It adds some technical depth to what is otherwise a very simple and only adequately presented game. Gametrak needed *Dark Wind* to do two things: to prove that it worked and to show it wasn't just a novelty. It's delivered, but only on the first aspect. **[5]**



Special attacks can cause you to jump backwards, a movement Gametrak doesn't currently support





TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2

FORMAT: XBOX/PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT PREVIOUSLY IN: E141







The new Freak Out option – hammer the triangle button when you bail – is designed to give you a few points when you start your next combo. Trouble is, it pops up only irregularly, meaning that you often cancel it with other button presses

For all his acrobatic fame, Tony Hawk has spawned a videogame series about baby steps; one small shuffle of progress can mean giant leaps for those devoted to his games. And when a series is locked in such tight orbit around the singular gameplay idea of combo-mongering, it's no wonder it has had to look to more novel (and, in *THUG*'s case, flimsy) ways of keeping up the pretence of freshness.

THUG2's World Destruction Tour Career mode is still patchy and meandering. Level design has been reeled in, offering more compact and thoughtful playgrounds than *THUG*'s bland cityscapes, but there's still too much emphasis on zany skate escapades rather than channelling the player towards ever-more-complex high-score highs.

The vehicles have gone, mercifully, but in their place is an assault of characters. There are four per level – you, a pro, a guest and a secret skater – one of whom is invariably a useless, unwieldy novelty. Still, even at their worst, things feel more solid and less disposable than *THUG*'s more shambolic moments. *THUG2*'s new moves are an inconsequential batch, except maybe for the sticker slap, being a smoother variant of the wall plant. The focus (slow-mo) option is one you often forget – or refuse – to use during the unblinking, multi-button frenzy of an intense combo.

In fact, *THUG2*'s biggest step forward – its stripped-down Classic mode – is one it takes back. It's as refreshing as it is nostalgic, taking on old-school *Tony Hawk* levels and goals with *THUG*'s improved trick set, and proves to be a necessary antidote to the mouthy fluster of the career mode, offering up pure, clinical, disciplined high-score play against the clock.

THUG2 is, as is typical for the series, still an addictive example of grow-your-own-high-score gaming, a fact reinforced more by the Classic section than the throwaway trappings of the main game. It's another baby step, then, but one that'll having doting parents cooing as much as they ever did. **[7]**



The Classic mode is pretty much a symptom of schizophrenia, of the need to keep the core of the gameplay tight and singular while the Career mode branches out into more lacklustre, but novel, story-led goals in order to try to offer some seemingly fresh entertainment



UNDER THE SKIN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCTOBER 29 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: PRODUCTION STUDIO 4 PREVIOUSLY IN: E140

Capcom may be notorious for its sequels, but in 1999 it set up Production Studio 4 to focus on creating original titles. So far the fruits have been mixed, with the startling *Viewtiful Joe* and the flawed *PN 03* preparing the way for this latest rainbow-coloured assault on the eyes. In singleplayer, that assault is as dazzling as it is brief, but *Under The Skin* is designed for company. The focus is firmly on twoplayer chaos, with the singleplayer mode acting as little more than a tutorial with bots.

You play as mischievous space invader Cosmi, charged with the task of creating Jeremy Beadle-style havoc on Earth. This jumpstarts a frantic cycle of stealing an earthling's appearance, unleashing T-Rexes and boxing gloves in order to scare coins from the locals' pockets, and then scarpering before the enraged crowd beats you into a more recognisably alien shape. But 'frantic' here is not videogame code for 'clumsy and shallow'. Thanks to the combo effects of items, there's surprising scope for cunning and strategy while dodging the custard pies and impromptu karaoke.

Combined with the presence of your opponents – up to the same tricks you are – you'll need to adapt your policy of hunting, fleeing and cooperating on the run as each level reveals its well-thought-out idiosyncrasies. Presented with the visual wit that was Joe's viewtiful hallmark, *Under The Skin* represents that rare achievement: a game whose aesthetics perfectly match the tone and style of its gameplay.



Each level has its own unique Panic Time event, which adds intricacy to the game's general pandemonium. On the nautical Big Booty Bay level, pirates shower the arena with cannonballs

While all this jokeshop mayhem is entertaining enough, it's compromised by a whoopee cushion of a camera. It's erratic, and requires continual tweaking to keep it pointing in the same direction you are. It's not a fatal flaw, but one that constantly distracts in a game that requires your brain to turn on a dozen dimes a minute. Nitpicking aside, *Under The Skin*'s unpretentious and innovative gameplay is like a bucket of water perched atop a doorframe: surprising at first, but highly refreshing. But the nature of all jokes, even the good ones, is that they wear thin sooner than you'd like. **[6]**



Much of *Under The Skin's* fun comes from using items to unmask your alien rival and steal their coins. One hit reduces them to their underwear, and a second will expose their ET lineage. Hilarious wars of prankish attrition usually follow as players' thirst for revenge takes over from more rational strategic impulses


ZELDA

TIME EXTEND

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

FORMAT: **N64**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2000**



In the first of our second sittings with important titles of recent years we look at the oddest, darkest and saddest of all Zelda games

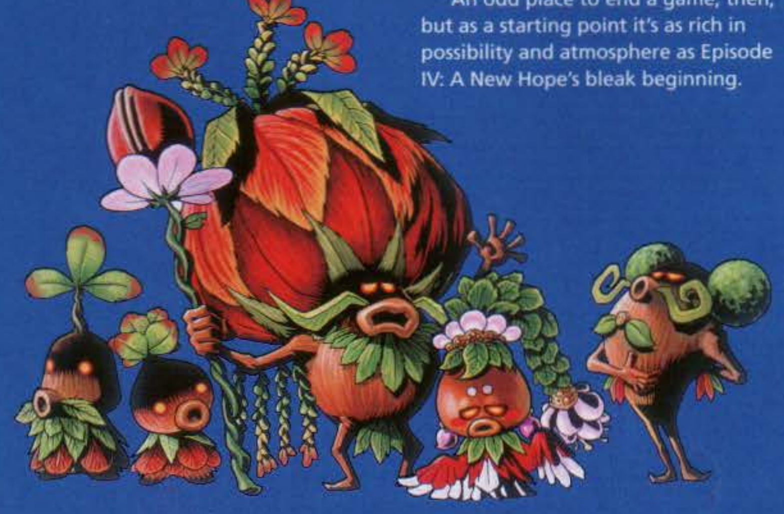
Long before MEGATON!!! there was TRIFORCE!!! Nintendo rumours have always been fuelled by hope as much as by hype, and 1999 was no different. As Zelda devotees faced the horrible prospect of actually finishing *Ocarina of Time* – seven long years of waiting capped by a brief fortnight of ecstatic gaming – whispers of a hidden quest began to spread. By learning the Song of Sages (or unlocking Dark Link, or finding the invisible chest in the Great Deku Tree, or catching two big fish in a row, or just buying it for 500 rupees, depending on who you asked) you could actually find the Triforce. Suddenly that trio of triangles on the item screen made sense, suddenly there was something to take the sting out of Ganon's final curses. The dubious screenshots that accompanied the rumours were duly debunked, of course, and nintendo.com apologised for exacerbating the situation with an ill-judged April Fool. The Triforce was officially unobtainable.

There was a reason for the insatiable thirst for that rumour to be true, however, and it's one that isn't often talked about. For something that's popularly recognised as The Greatest Game Ever Made, *Ocarina* ends on a bleak and hollow note. It's not something you notice in the jubilation of besting Ganon and watching the celebrations spread across the land. But as you sit, staring at 'Please reset your Nintendo 64', the excitement begins to drain out of you and in its place rises something darker. Imagine it. Link, again a boy, returns to a world ignorant of the fate from which he's saved it. He's a hero no one's heard of, a saviour of a non-existent armageddon. And he's not a boy any more, although he looks like one. He's fought and lived as a man, felt his boy-like adoration for Zelda mature as he meets her again in adult form. Where can he go? He has learned on his travels that he doesn't belong with the Kokiri. He isn't a forest fairy, he's discovered, and never was; he's an orphan abandoned first by his dying mother and now by Navi, who leaves him as he returns the Master Sword to its proper place. The future that unfolds in your mind once the credits roll is one of the subtlest, densest and saddest stories videogames have ever told.

An odd place to end a game, then, but as a starting point it's as rich in possibility and atmosphere as Episode IV: A New Hope's bleak beginning. Link and Epona (for he's not totally alone) pace through a gloomy forest. The strange path of his adventure has exiled him from his home, and now he's lost in the strange world of Termina. Everything looks so familiar (although Link could hardly be expected to understand that it's because Termina's world is running on *Ocarina*'s engine) and yet everything looks so wrong. Then there's an attack, a theft, a bruising chase and a prank so viciously cruel as to steal the identity from a boy who had nothing else left to hold on to. Of all the moments that have been sanctified as representing 'that Nintendo magic', none has been so tearingly sad as when Deku Link first catches sight of his mutated, dejected reflection.

> **The future that unfolds in your mind once the credits roll is one of the subtlest, densest and saddest stories videogames have ever told**

It's one of the finest motivations a videogame has ever given a player, and your desperation to recover Link's true form drives you through the first hours of the game. It's a necessary blessing – few games have begun with such a daringly off-putting few hours. Getting to grips with *Majora's* three-day cycle is one of gaming's rites of passage. Once you've got it clear in your head, it's hard to imagine how anyone ever struggled with it. But think back and remember how stressed you were as the hours ticked by like minutes (exactly like minutes, come to think of it) and that fifth Bomber kid still eluded you. Thousands of players never went back after those first bewildering 72 minutes, and little wonder. When they'd left off with *Ocarina* they'd been a superhero – armed to the teeth, dressed up to the nines, health bar stretching to the middle of the screen. Now they pick up the same





GREEN CHEESE

Every 72 minutes – unless you rewind time – the game ends with the fat-toothed moon grinding into the earth in a red-tinged riot of furious destruction. Arriving on its surface is by far the single most startling moment in the game. You're geared up for something macabre, a horror-ridden hellhole that will keep you awake at nights. Instead you arrive on a world which is in a serene and beautiful stasis. For long moments it's a relief, and then a sense of sinister dread overtakes you. The people you meet and the conversations you have only amplify your uneasiness and in the end you come to fear its beautiful heart as much as its ugly exterior...

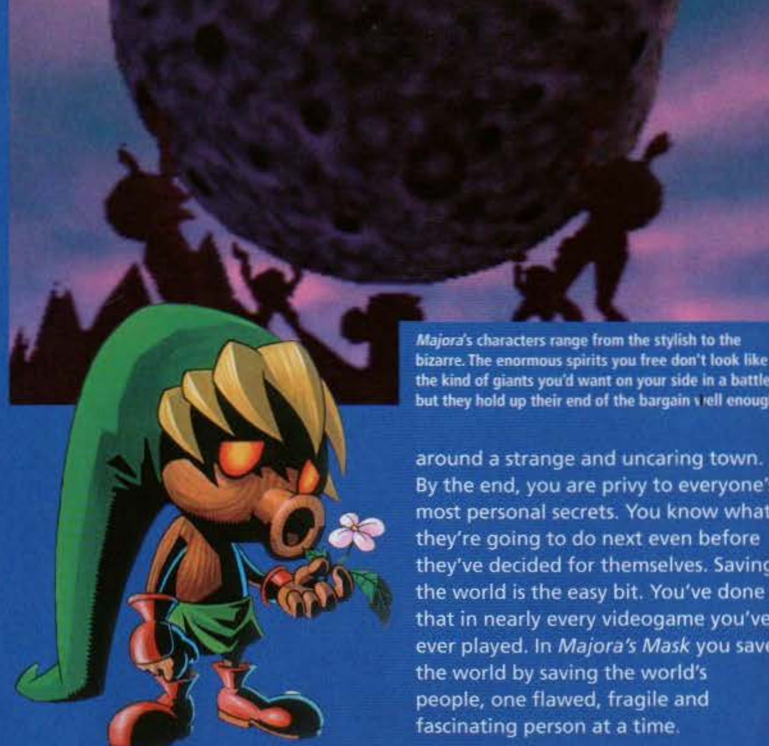
brand name, the same controller, and instead they're a helpless plant playing a game that they're guaranteed to lose. But they missed out, the people who let themselves be discouraged. They missed out on something wonderful.

If this were a review, there would have to be talk of *Majora*'s occasionally wayward camera. It would have to tut over the shortage of 'proper' dungeons and lament that Link's later transformations – to Goron and Zora respectively – aren't used as fully as his Deku persona. It would express reservations about the series' reliance on fetch-and-carry quests, on mazes and follow-my-leader. But this isn't a review, so those concerns can be gleefully sidestepped. Instead, what matters is what *Majora* got right, and it's only fair to say that a fair proportion of what it gets right was pinched from its older brother.

Once the initial stages of the game are complete, there is certainly plenty of *Zelda*-ing to be done. Although the four main dungeons aren't as meatily pleasing as the best in *Ocarina*, they are home to puzzle rooms and boss fights of a standard few games have since bettered. Mini-games, horseback archery, Skulltulla quests and heart piece collecting – if all you were looking for was an *Ocarina* add-on patch, there is much more familiarity here than first meets the eye.

In fact, the familiarity allows a better appreciation of the game's core achievements. No longer reeling from *Ocarina*'s three-dimensional revolution, *Majora* gives you time to enjoy the tiny details. To revel in the animated perfection of Deku Link's pirouette, or the way the imprisoned monkey claps his feet together. To savour the way familiar tunes become warped with a carnival hysteria as the end of the world approaches. And the grandeur of *Ocarina*'s epic tale is the perfect foil for *Majora*'s love of the absurd. There's nothing like an encroaching armageddon to make you appreciate the daftness of scottie-dog races and alien cow abductions.

However, for most, what they remember of *Majora* is its people. The repeating cycle of three days and three nights allows the game to introduce you to the citizens of Termina in an organic and believable way. Rather than being met by lumps of text or awkward speeches, you find out about people by seeing how they live, meeting them as they circle again and again through the last few days of their lives. Even the most incidental characters – the town guards and the officious Deku traders – let slip little human details which add enormous emotional weight to the game. And, as Link does his rounds, his place in the gameworld changes. At the start, you are the very definition of an outsider, wandering lost and wordless around a strange and uncaring town. By the end, you are privy to everyone's most personal secrets. You know what they're going to do next even before they've decided for themselves. Saving the world is the easy bit. You've done that in nearly every videogame you've ever played. In *Majora's Mask* you save the world by saving the world's people, one flawed, fragile and fascinating person at a time.



Majora's characters range from the stylish to the bizarre. The enormous spirits you free don't look like the kind of giants you'd want on your side in a battle, but they hold up their end of the bargain well enough

As your familiarity with Clock Town grows, the real reason for its name becomes clear – the whole town and everyone in it resolves into a giant clockwork machine – and you know every cog. From taking in a sinuous acrobatic performance in the cool night air to sharing Anju's heartbroken midnight vigil, your actions have the power to mend, change and shape these people's lives. Just because the game achieves this sophistication simply, with a few well-chosen lines of dialogue and a scrap of elegant animation, it doesn't lessen its impact. Solving all the subquests and collecting all the masks is the absolute opposite of an empty, 100 per cent complete-a-thon. Instead, it's a real emotional imperative, and finishing each person's story makes the game's final sequence a genuine delight. For a game with such a bleak beginning, it has perhaps the warmest ending ever crafted.

> **You find out about people by seeing how they live, meeting them as they circle again and again through the last few days of their lives**

It's hard to over-emphasise *Majora*'s emotional achievements. Four years on, few developers have dared take on the lessons that it teaches about how to handle story and character in games. However, it's only the beginning of what the game has to teach. There are other essays to be written, on how it should have revolutionised game-saving systems, but didn't. On how delicately the

Some masks are more useless than others, and some are more sinister than beautiful, but the novelty of Link dressing up like someone else never wears off



Much of *Majora's* presentation draws on horror-film tradition. The gruesome character design, the jump-cuts of the Mask Seller's speeches, and the sickening rattle that accompanies the Skull Kid all owe their impact to film associations

subquests influence the way the main quests are played (try infiltrating the Pirate Fortress with and without the Stone Mask). On Anju and Kafei and what may be gaming's greatest love story. On how the game has influenced later *Zeldas* and how much blame it must bear for unleashing Tingle on an undeserving world. Then there are tales to tell, of frog-collecting and curse-lifting, of spider-catching and fairy-herding, but the best way to discover them isn't to read information in magazines. Instead, let the game tell you its story, whether for the first time or for a second, third or tenth. *Ocarina* may have been close to perfect, but *Majora's Mask* is twice as revealing – a link to the future as well as to the past.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Swordfish Studios Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 2002

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 55

HEAD OF STUDIO: Trevor Williams (below left)

KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:
Proven track record in developing both mainstream and niche sports games. Ability to take complex sport such as rugby and turn it into enjoyable videogame experience. Storming-looking *Cold Winter* will be debut FPS title.

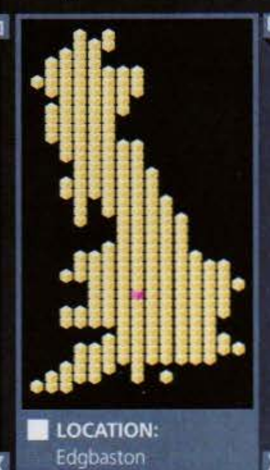







Cold Winter

World Champ Rugby 2



LOCATION: Edgbaston

URL: www.swordfishstudios.com

KEY STAFF:
Julian Widdows (development director), Andy Williams (sports development lead), Ian Flatt (sports development manager), Dave Percival (technical lead, *Cold Winter*).

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Jonah Lomu Rugby (PS1, Saturn, PC), *UEFA Striker* (PS1, Saturn), *Hostile Waters: Antaeus Rising* (PC), *World Championship Rugby* (PS2, Xbox, PC).

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY:
Proprietary cross-platform sports development suite, consisting of audio, AI, physics and rendering engines running on PS2, Xbox and PC, all stored in in-house libraries. PS2 engine features average throughput of 110K polys per frame, with peak of 175K. *Cold Winter's* proprietary AI system features use of dynamic and static cover, movement between cover and through cover, and team orders (including fire support, movement under fire and grenade tactics, among others).

CURRENT PROJECTS:
World Championship Rugby 2 (PS2, Xbox, PC – currently looking for new publishing partner), *Brian Lara Cricket* (Codemasters), *Cold Winter* (PS2, Vivendi Universal).

Rethinking PC patches

The latest version of Aardwork's game patching service GameShadow extends the vision to mods, demos and drivers



Tony Treadwell, CEO, Aardwork www.gameshadow.com



With approximately 1,200 supported games and demos, GameShadow makes it straightforward to keep PC software up to date

As often happen with elegant solutions to messy technical problems, PC game patching service GameShadow seems stubbornly ahead of its time. Not in the sense that its content-delivery infrastructure is pushing the boundaries of what's possible, or even that it requires a sophisticated audience or costs a fortune to use. In such respects, it couldn't be much simpler or easier. Now supporting a range of patches for 1,200 games, all you have to do to gain access is download a client, which tells you what PC games are installed on your PC or network. Cleverly it can also tell the game version number, using this information to reveal if any newer patches are available. Even the financial cost is minimal; the annual subscription fee is a mere £10. And the next version of GameShadow will see the company moving to wrap extra content such as mods, demos and movies around its patch delivery. Other gaming-related technology such as DirectX and graphics card drivers are also included as the service develops into the complete gaming-content management portal (see 'Moving Shadow').

But according to Aardwork's CEO, **Tony Treadwell**, the 12 months since we last covered the technology have underlined some significantly backward attitudes within the PC gaming market.

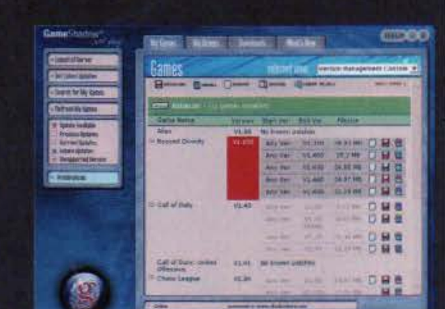
"We knew we'd have to build awareness with consumers," Treadwell explains. Potential obstacles include misconceptions about GameShadow introducing spyware or messing around with registry files; neither of which it does. There was also the issue that hardcore PC gamers, inveterate tinkerers to a man, seem to prefer spending hours hunting around the internet for patches which generally are freely available; in that sense trading time for money.

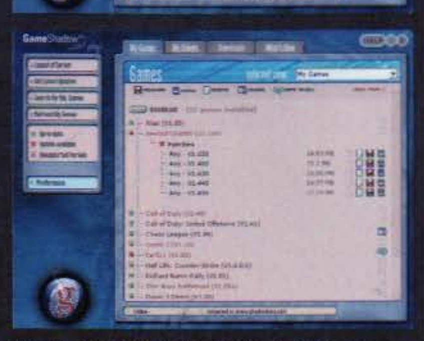
"What we didn't think we'd have to do is build awareness with publishers," Treadwell adds. "With a number of notable exceptions, I've been amazed how publishers treat their customers. Not only do they not seem to know what they want or how they feel about the games they've bought, [but] frankly they don't seem to care either."

And he has some figures to back up his case, with around 23 per cent of a survey of GameShadow users claiming they have been dissuaded from buying a sequel because of bugs. Almost half said they had returned a product in the past because of such problems.

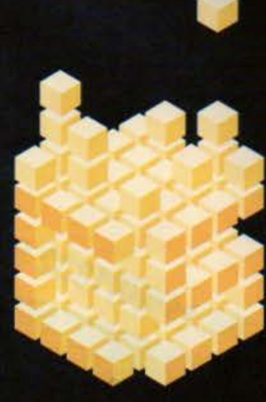
Clearly, with a game-patching service to sell, it's in Aardwork's interest to bandy about such figures, but with franchises and intellectual property so important to the industry, it would be a brave product manager to dismiss them out of hand. As well-publicised recent problems with *Thief 3* and *The Sims 2* prove, once consumers have spent their £40, they get a little irritated if they feel a game isn't working as it should.

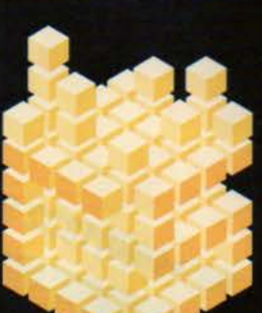
Yet GameShadow has slowly been

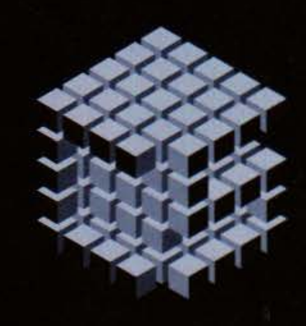




At its simplest, GameShadow checks your PC for all games and demos, identifying the versions installed. It then provides information about any patches or updates, and lets you download them from one central server







picking up converts. A big breakthrough recently came with the announcement that the service will be providing official support for Sports Interactive's *Football Manager 2005*. One bigger outfit dipping its toe into the water is Ubisoft, which will trial GameShadow on its forthcoming movie tie-in *Alexander*. Another feather in the cap came with a link-up with forward-looking UK publisher Digital Jesters. This deal sees GameShadow shipping on all its PC games and providing free support for patches and extras. Users also have the opportunity to upgrade to the full version of GameShadow.

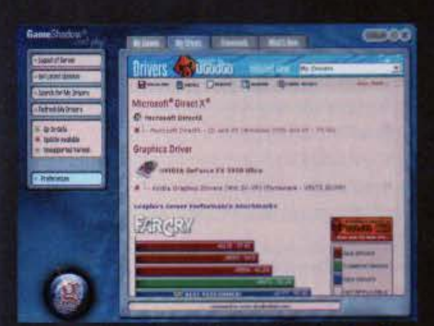
"One of the benefits of being a smaller and focused publisher is we can move quickly," explains Digital Jesters' technical manager **Jason Harman** when asked why he thought bigger publishers hadn't picked up on GameShadow. "When we first heard about GameShadow, the concept fitted with our ethos. There's no extra cost for the gamer and they get updates and patches for Digital Jesters' games for life."

"It's been a great deal for us," agrees Treadwell. "To a large degree, the best way for us to build up our profile is for GameShadow to be preinstalled on games. Even though we only launched with Digital Jesters in the summer, we've had lots of people, especially more casual gamers, come to us that way. Otherwise they just don't know about the service we can provide."

One business sector which has embraced GameShadow is the PC system-building industry. US outfit VoodooPC, which focuses on high-end gaming machines, has signed an exclusive hardware partnership deal for the US. This sees GameShadow rebranded as GameDoctor and preinstalled on all VoodooPC machines. "Our customers come back to us because of the service and quality equipment we provide. Delivering value-added services like GameDoctor enables us to provide a unique gaming experience," says VoodooPC's president **Rahul Sood**.

Other opportunities Treadwell is investigating include licensing the GameShadow database to companies which audit corporate networks. "Such information is useful to them so they can identify if games, unauthorised or not, are on a system," he says.

There's also the possibility of developing a non-games AppShadow to ensure corporate software is always up to date. "Games will always be our core market but GameShadow is a flexible piece of technology," Treadwell says. "In the past, we've been amazed how lethargic the industry can be, but I think we're still ahead of the curve. Things are starting to happen."



The next version of GameShadow provides a benchmark showing which graphics card drivers give the best performance for a range of hardware-intensive games





The patch model of GameShadow is being extended with support for mods, movies and demos, all neatly arranged in the same UI, making it simple to see what's available. And, with both UK and US servers, it has plenty of bandwidth

Moving Shadow

Currently in beta, the next version of GameShadow extends the assets offered by the service, allowing access to not only patches but also a selection of movies, mods and demos, each of which is organised around each game title. Other tweaks include the ability to launch GameShadow from the system tray, with full control provided over how and if the system auto-updates. "Gamers hate losing bandwidth and really hate having no control when they lose bandwidth," says Treadwell. The link-up with US system builder VoodooPC has also resulted in a neat benchmark system for Nvidia and ATI graphic card drivers. This demonstrates which driver produces the fastest gaming experience for a variety of games and, surprisingly, it's not always the latest driver that's fastest. In future, the company hopes to extend the idea for sound cards and motherboards, too.



Cracking the crackers

Treadwell believes that the utilitarian idea of the internet, as a magical source providing free stuff without responsibility, remains firmly embedded in the psyche. "I really think the attitude amongst some hardcore gamers that piracy is OK has to stop," he says. "It's hurting the business. *Doom 3* was cracked at launch and within two days had been downloaded 80,000 times."

Such mealymouthed behaviour even extends to users who roll over the GameShadow evaluation trial version. Limited to five patch downloads per trial version, which is registered to an email address, Treadwell says, after using their quota, some people will just re-register with an new email address and start the process again. "It says a lot about a certain type of PC gamers. They're happier going through this sort of hassle than paying a tenner," he bemoans. "And they're probably the people downloading pirated games."

Significantly, this is one area in which GameShadow can help publishers: it only allows users to download patches for legitimate copies, extending the lifespan of such games and providing a reason to refuse pirated games.

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Being there at GTA's beginning

BY GARY PENN

Hey, it's that time of the year again – time for the British media to deride or ignore a rare, well-deserved homegrown success story and concentrate on convenient copy concerning controversy over supposedly contentious content. The latest *GTA* looks like being the grandest of all – a work of insane proportions to stay way ahead of the pretenders. And to think the concept almost never made it.

Who invented *GTA*? It's like asking who's Spartacus. The exploitation of the concept is what matters: no one person invented *GTA* – it just happened. It started with the technology to enable a distinctive viewpoint, and from that primordial soup crawled the notion of a believable city and playing cops and robbers. The title, *Race 'n' Chase*, accurately reflected the content: more *Pac-Man* than the *Elite* or *Mercenary* it was to become. Even the use of missions was like any other – triggered from a menu until eventually the decision was taken to 'naturalise' as much as possible into play.

GTA's development was like a snowball with dozens of eager hands pushing in all directions. Design by democracy, it was a large group of kids playing games they'd never played before, making it all up as they went along, everyone voicing their thoughts, seldom in unison, bickering, backstabbing. Opinions, ideas and people came and went but the unstoppable, unstable Tower of Babel grew, no one daring to remove parts in case the whole thing fell apart.

It was amateur-dramatic development, but the combination of naïvete and friction created a unique energy – there was something in the air and something in the concept. The problem was channelling the something, making the something work effectively – and (unbeknown to the development team at the time) before the US arm of the publisher overcame the convictions of the UK office and pulled the plug because progress was so erratic.

One of many turning points came at the end of 1996, when a discontented team tightened up the design and, perhaps most importantly, replaced the vehicle handling. Suddenly, the main toys were vaguely satisfying to use. Gone were the shopping trolleys with three remaining wheels, two of which were dodgy, on ice with a heavy and loose load. The cops were less believable than the Keystone variety until they were 'dumbed down' and accidentally became overly aggressive (only because they were trying to drive through everything). Suddenly, their performance was dramatic and direct and they paid attention to players.

> The exploitation of the concept is what matters: no one person invented Grand Theft Auto – it just happened

But still the dust wouldn't settle. For a year the software had been crashing after five minutes of play, which meant adequate testing was impossible, especially for the playscape and mission designers and the audio department. The foundation was constantly appended and amended, variables changing without consideration or consultation, writers' words failing to match up with the mission functionality, and the potential for 'fail conditions' growing bigger by the day to cater for overly precise player challenges.

Eventually, a concerted effort was made to improve stability and no more features were added, until one day... it was playable for more than five minutes. It looked revolting, scars to reflect its abused heritage, but it was actually satisfying and almost compelling to play.

It went on to sell over three million worldwide, which is impressive but pales against the might of *GTAIII* and *Vice City* (and *San Andreas* will sell the most). Since *GTAIII*, the toyset has been so much more tangible and the theme more in tune with HBO sensibilities, making it more accessible to more people than its more abstract prototype precursors (and open to censorship in less liberal cultures).

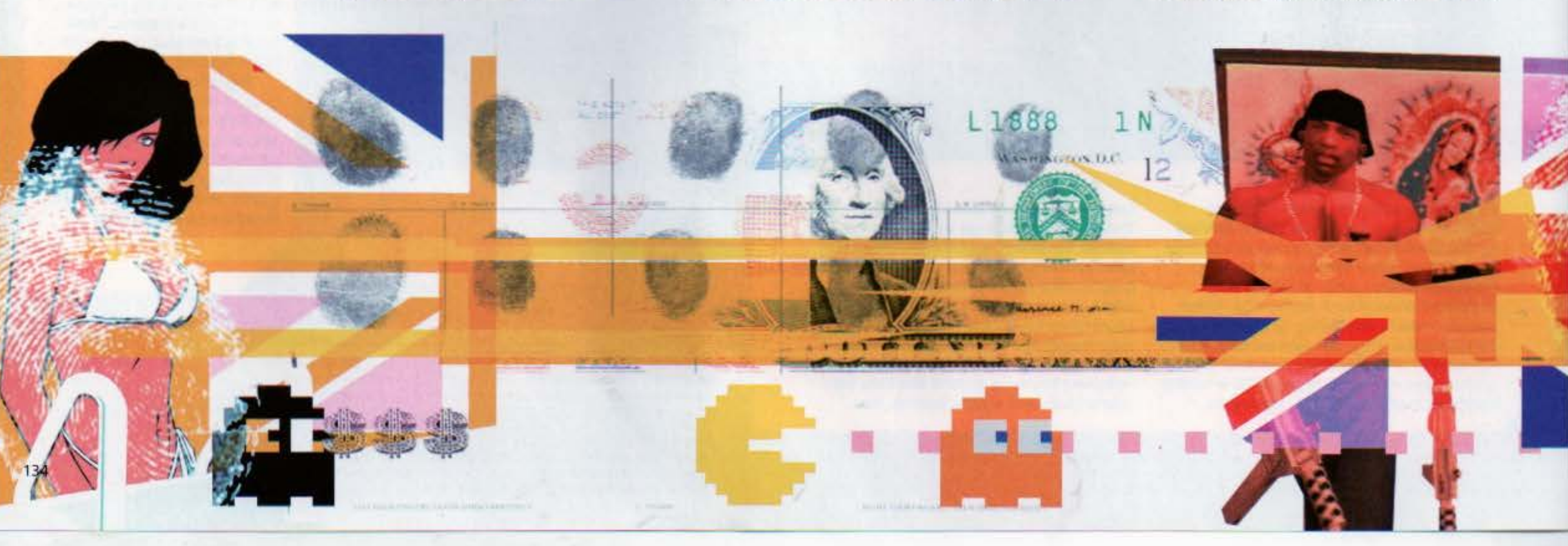
The joy and pain of *GTA* is that it's so easy to have ideas for it. It's a system much like those employed by real toy manufacturers such as Playmobil: themed toysets with generic action figures at their heart and accessories and playscape features to enable appropriate play.

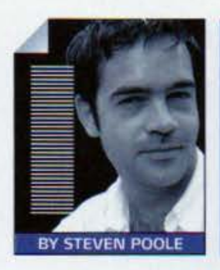
This developed into the notion of focusing all our efforts on a city-based repertoire – to become specialists in the exploitation of urban microcosms. (Consider how many books, films and television programmes take place in such settings; there's enough foundation for variety through familiarity to last a lifetime.) The key word is repertoire: familiar, practiced, developed parts – like actors. It's more than just reusing technology, it's knowing how to reuse it, how to make the toys and components as quickly as possible – to put less emphasis on the toyset's construction and more on its exploitation.

No one who worked on the first *GTA* could have predicted its effect, especially by its third iteration. Everyone, it seems, wants more of the same: play within strong thematic boundaries but without formal goals. The freedom to play with the toys the way you want to, the way you used to with the boyhood staples of action figures, vehicles and pretend weapons – to make your own entertainment.

Hey, things *are* what they used to be.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki




BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY

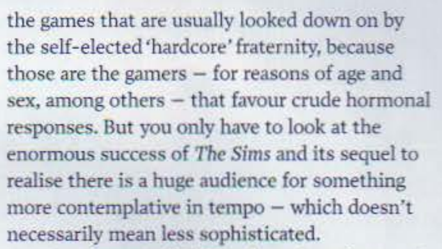
Chilling out... and shooting stuff

Sometimes you just want to chill out. Sometimes, surveillance cameras triggering floods of armed guards, or slavering demons from hell jumping out at you from around every corner, are just too, well, stressful. You can get that at the local supermarket. You don't necessarily want to recreate the experience at home. I have on occasion compared the philosopher Walter Benjamin's description of the new-fangled cinema to the potential of videogames: he wrote in awe about a form that enabled the spectator to 'calmly and adventurously go travelling'. But there's nothing calm about *Riddick* or *Far Cry*, great games though they are.

Videogames that trade on something other than fear and/or adrenaline are relatively few, and I think it's no coincidence that they are also the games that are usually looked down on by the self-elected 'hardcore' fraternity, because those are the gamers – for reasons of age and sex, among others – that favour crude hormonal responses. But you only have to look at the enormous success of *The Sims* and its sequel to realise there is a huge audience for something more contemplative in tempo – which doesn't necessarily mean less sophisticated.

Now, I wasn't thinking along these lines as I installed *Myst IV: Revelation* on to my shiny new liquid-cooled G5 one evening. I was, rather, yawning complacently at the prospect of bland point 'n' clickery, a kind of digital postcard for people who don't really like videogames. But when I next checked the time, still puzzling over how the heck I was going to counterbalance a floating ship made of rock with the right electromagnetic forces from above and below, it was three in the morning. Maybe there's something to this after all.

It's easy to list the objections first. A three-dimensional exploration game that doesn't allow free movement is, in this day and age, a prehistoric notion, a throwback to the halcyon days when CD-ROM was the next big thing. Inevitably, you spend much of your time in *Myst IV* patiently scrubbing the screen with your cursor because it's impossible to tell just by sight which objects are deemed interactive, or in which direction the game will allow you to travel next. Essentially you are forced to engage in random activity in order to discover the next link in an entirely predetermined sequence. This is hardly an advert for the kind of dynamic, reactive experience we have been taught to expect by truly 'experimental' games (by which I mean those in which you can conduct fruitful experiments) such as *Deus Ex*.



> "The conventional wisdom which avers that Broken Sword is good and Myst is bad seems to me incoherent"

And yet this maddening old-school style has some interesting effects. For a start, obviously it escapes the kinds of glitches in 'real' 3D games whereby you can feel you are fighting against the interface and the movement mechanics more often than you are engaging with the spatial problems of a well-designed environment. And more importantly, perhaps, it forces the player to privilege looking over moving. In many games where you are hellbent on moving and fighting with fluidity and precision, the most gorgeous environment may be relegated to a pretty backdrop. In *Myst IV* you stand in one place and look. So a kind of optical pleasure is privileged, a concentration on enjoying and then analysing the view. And there is no denying that *Myst IV* is visually beautiful. Sunlight streams in through summerhouse windows, palm fronds wave gently in the breeze, dark emerald caverns glint and glitter. The wealth and detail of design and animation are extraordinary.

Another interesting virtue of the point 'n' click interface is that its precision allows an unusually strong tactile, haptic sense. Using your disembodied-hand cursor to grab levers and twist dials invokes an experience of really interacting with arcane machinery that is unmatched by the legions of first- or thirdperson games which tell you: 'Stand here – no, here! – no, two pixels to the left! – and click X to operate this pointless console'. With its enormous variety of grabbable contraptions, *Myst IV* thereby offers the closest mechanical analogue to a true steampunk aesthetic. The tortuous logic problems which these machines embody, meanwhile, can often make you feel as though you are being subjected to some bizarre multimedia Mensa entrance test, but in their intellectual rigour they clearly shame what pass for puzzles in the vast majority of games.

I don't think *Myst IV* is a great game, but I don't think it's flatly dismissable either. The conventional videogame-fan wisdom which avers that *Broken Sword*, say, is good and *Myst* is bad seems to me incoherent. If you want to calmly and adventurously go travelling, to take an intellectually engaging holiday inside your desktop, *Myst IV* does it rather well. The videogame artform is a broad church, and there is ample room for things that cater to all casts of mind.

Now, however, my trigger finger is itching, and it's time for a quick blast on PomPom's *SpaceTripper*, a glorious fusion of *Defender* and *Uridium*. Ah yes, shooting stuff is good too.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com



THE GUEST COLUMN

And so the journey begins...

BY TIM GUEST

After a week in South Korea, I finally tracked down the king of the world. He doesn't look like a king. If you saw him on the street at 9am, as he pulled up the shutters to his hamburger restaurant, you might think he was down on his luck. His shoulders are slumped. He has a tired look in his eye. It's no wonder: ruling the world takes up between ten and 20 hours a day, and that's not including the time he spends flipping burgers. After four hours' sleep, he barely has any energy for the restaurant. These days, by 9:30am, the place is usually still dead, so he walks upstairs to his office, sits down on his padded swivel chair, and becomes king.

His name is **Kyu Nam Choi**, and his kingdom is *Lineage II*, the sequel to the largest and most populated virtual world on the planet.

I met him in the Seoul offices of NCSoft, Korea's most successful game developer. There, in a conference room on the eighth floor, Choi – particularly weary from a long, heroic battle the night before – brushed his long fringe from his eyes, leaned back, sipped a plum juice, and explained his double life.

Offline, if he's lucky, his restaurant serves 200 customers a week; online, as the most successful player in *Lineage II*, he rules over three million subjects. Offline, he has trouble paying his bills; online, when he runs short of cash, he just raises the taxes.

Each week, over 27 million people worldwide – more than passed through US immigration at Ellis Island throughout the 20th century – abandon our reality for virtual worlds like Choi's, in the same way Americans once abandoned old Europe. Many spend more time in these shared imaginary worlds – alternate universes like *EverQuest*, *Star Wars Galaxies* and *The Sims Online* – than they do at their real jobs. There, through the electronic looking glass, they can lead seductive new second lives, they can build and sell property, work, get married, get a divorce or die, and leave the limitations of their body and the troubles of the real world far behind them.

When I discovered the extent of this mass migration, I decided to follow. I would take up residence in the virtual worlds and report back what I found. For my first trip, I travelled to South Korea, partly because I was fascinated by Choi's double life, and also because in South Korea the global mania for computer gaming has reached its peak.

> Each week, over 27 million people worldwide abandon our reality for virtual worlds like Lineage II

Each year, twice as many people visit Korean-made virtual worlds as visit Korea. Professional Korean gamers can earn six-figure salaries, have their own television shows and are recognised by screaming fans on the street. Choi – the most successful massively multiplayer online gamer in Korea – was more modest. He wouldn't even let me take his picture. But perhaps there's more to that than modesty...

Over a cup of Starbucks coffee in Coex, Asia's largest mall, Seoul-based games critic Park Sang Woo explained to me that, compared to gamers from other cultures, Koreans identify much more closely with their online selves. When their characters are assaulted online, Korean players sometimes take real-world revenge. Inspector Byong Il Sung of the Korean police's Cyber-Terror Unit told me there were at least a hundred such 'offline PK' attacks each month. As the most powerful player in *Lineage II*, Choi is especially at risk. So, when I raised my camera, he shook his head.

In the real world, when Choi opens his restaurant's shutters he has to watch over his shoulder for vengeful player-killers; in the game, as the most powerful character, he could kill ten attackers single-handed. In the real world, nobody talks to Choi; in the game, everyone wants an audience with the king. It was this liberation from real-world limitations, he told me, that kept him playing up to 20 hours a day, even as his restaurant failed. "I have killed, I have been killed, I have been reborn," he said. "These are things I can't do in real life. I don't own a car, but in the game I can fly."

Choi's entire adult life had been focused on his business. He trusted no one; he had never known a close friend. Then, one afternoon, by chance, he discovered *Lineage II*. Through the game, he began to find the friendship he had missed all his life. Now, at the age of 32, he's making up for lost time. He has never had a girlfriend, but he hopes one day to meet someone online, get married and settle down. Until then, despite his struggling restaurant business, he wouldn't give up playing *Lineage II* for the world.

At NCSoft HQ, as Choi prepared to go home to his hamburger restaurant and to his royal throne, I asked one last question. If he had to pick between the real world or the game world, which would he choose? He closed his eyes. "In real life, even though I own my business, I am just an ordinary person," he said. "In the game life, I rule the world."

There was a long pause. He opened his eyes. "I choose the game."

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta



THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMING

Chapter 24
The Age of Television

JOYMASTERS (Channel 4, 1992-1996)

Fronted by acerbic Welsh comic Rory Pulip for most of its run, Joymasters was one of the two pillars of early-to-mid-'90s gaming TV (the other being ITV's Wicked Skillz!, presented by Florid Parp and Matthew Threatless, with occasional appearances from wacky tips specialist Gnillag Tunc).

Filmed in a disused S&M dungeon, the eponymous figurehead of Joymasters was a being known as The Joymaster, portrayed by the corpse of deceased science expert Magnus Pike. Dressed up to resemble a sort of cybernetic bird thing, with papier-mache beak, and tumble-dryer ventilation pipe dangling from his stomach, Pike's body was suspended high above the studio audience.

At key moments during the show, Pulip would bellow "Joymaster descendeth!", yank on a concealed lever, and Pike would be released. As his net dropped away, a klaxon sounded and The Joymaster would freefall some 15 feet, before swinging wildly across the set on a wire, his exposed lower jaw lolling lifelessly, arms swinging like limp bratwurst, and banging against pipes. This powerful moment would signify that it was time for another challenge to begin.

The Joymaster challenges boasted the nail-gnawing, adrenal thrill of ancient Rome's gladiatorial duels – only four or five times more exciting. Perhaps intentionally, the half-naked stars of ITV's lurid Gladiators show were Joymasters regulars, with appearances from the likes of Thruster, Ink and Chuffweasel. However, celebrity appearances on Joymaster weren't confined to these revolting beefcakes.

During his *Super Hang On* challenge, a confused Russell Grant allegedly tried to grind his Mega Drive joypad into the face of a small fox he'd inexplicably brought along (the incident has never aired), whilst Todd from Neighbours inevitably suffered an epileptic fit as he played *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*. Frugal producers re-edited the footage and over-dubbed it with cheap Euro house, to make it appear as if he was breakdancing. Despite being pronounced clinically dead for the duration of his challenge, the actor still managed to beat six-year-old Dipesh Wuumwuss.

The final two series of the show took the Gladiators references further, using members of the Joymasters production team as colourful 'Pad-iators' – cheaper alternatives to the celebrity guests. Nevertheless, few would deny that Clinically Obese Thomas (whose fingers were so fat he could only use a joypad if he'd had matchsticks taped to his fingers) and The Purple Twat (a member of the production team afflicted with the misguided belief that he was in some way worthy of being allowed on television) have become gaming legends, of a sort.

Commentaries on the challenges were provided by both the presenter and plucky magazine editor Derek Pumphrey. In themselves, these commentaries became a soap opera, due to the duo's feisty behind-the-scenes relationship. Over the course of several series, their initially good-natured banter descended into abject hatred, as Pulip and Pumphrey secretly embarked upon an ill-fated homosexual dalliance.

Frequently, their many spats and homophile guilt would spill over on to the s[…] in bitter jibing, which climaxed during the 1994 Christmas special. In the midst o[…] a furious Pulip beat Pumphrey into a coma using a length of heated bark strapped to a Bible, all the while screaming: "This'll teach you to borrow my tights without asking."

The cranial damage caused to Pumphrey – a five-inch-deep crater in his skull – led to him adopting his trademark bandana. On nights out, he would stuff the cloth scarf into his head hole, and cover it with a small square of lino.

Appalled with the show's new sponsorship by Ex-Lax, Pulip resigned prior to the 1995 series. That year, Joymasters was presented by one Heximuss Fleischer, a barely functioning crack addict the producers had found rooting through some bins behind the studio.

Fleischer's presenting style was unique, to say the least – much of what he said was delivered in an inaudible moan, punctuated by periods of wordless shrieking. Each episode during Fleischer's tenure climaxed with a Cockney singalong, featuring such East End favourites as I've Got A Little Whelk (In My Cup Of Jellied Eels), and The Whippet Song. Fleischer effectively died of a complimentary Ex-Lax overdose before filming on the final, 1996 series of Joymasters could begin. Pulip was lured back with the gift of a giant prism and a pledge from the producers that they would never look directly in his eyes.

During this final series Pulip pulled out all the stops, notoriously subverting what was ostensibly a children's show with his scatological wit and incisive double entendres. Who can forget the time he asked Helen Daniels out of Neighbours – there for a Sonic And Knuckles challenge – whether she liked "seamen"?

Eventually, this groundbreaking humour could not be contained, and the production team experimented with a late-night, adult version of the show. Changes included nailing a set of realistic rubber udders to Magnus Pike's chest, forcing the contestants to wear nothing but soiled merkins, and Pulip slapping an 11-year-old audience member into admitting he was "behaving like a bell-end."

By this point the viewers had grown weary of the increasingly tired format – ratings showed that the final episodes were watched by fewer than 27 people, all of whom had tuned in by accident – and Channel 4 wielded the axe.

Nevertheless, Joymasters' influence has outlived its on-screen life, lending inspiration to such respected publications as the Official Joymasters Magazine and the Official Joymasters Magazine Cheats Special.

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Eidos Interactive, senior management
TO: Tomb Raider production team, Crystal Dynamics

RE: SUGGESTIONS TO REVIVE THE TOMB RAIDER FRANCHISE

1. Give Lara larger breasts.
2. Give Lara slightly smaller breasts, but more of them.
3. Equip Lara with an arsenal of interchangeable breasts, each endowing her with special abilities (ie: the power to fly, the ability to swim, the power to limbo, etc).
4. We're thinking Lara needs another new side-kick, probably a sexy, wise-cracking, time-travelling cat (preferably with large breasts – but not too large, as we wouldn't want them to literally overshadow Lara's own).
5. More cut-scenes, featuring better defined personal drama (could Lara perhaps develop breast cancer, thereby adding a further element of jeopardy? If you need a scriptwriter for these scenes, there's a guy who works in our local Spar, who says he's a really good writer, and would probably do), and breasts.
6. Give Lara a special car (a breast-powered car?).
7. Suggested title: Lara's Girl Power Adventures in the Land of the Big Breasted Breast-Worshipping Amazonia Breast Women.
8. Make Lara more of a positive role-model for girls, by giving her a more aspirational day job, such as a plastic surgeon specialising in breast enlargements.
9. Get Chris Barrie to provide a running commentary over the entire game.
10. Add a football management element, but instead of managing football teams, players in some way have to manage breasts.

Whaddayathink? We're v. excited about some of these!

THE UNSEEN DIARY OF MR BIFFO (AGE 11¼

WHICH IS BETTER: SPECTRUM OR COMMODORE 64?

SPECTRUM FOR:
* SOFTER + MORE ABSORBENT.
* LOOKS LIKE IT MIGHT BE MADE OF LICORICE.
* CAN DO 3D GRAPHICS (SEE HAUNTED HEDGES).
* CAN GAMES GET BETTER THAN HORACE + THE SPIDERS?
* SIR CLIVE SINCLAIR IS AN UNTHREATENING ROLE-MODEL.

COMMODORE 64 FOR:
* BROWNER GRAPHICS.
* MORE LIKELY TO KILL SOMEONE IF DROPPED ON THEM.
* LOGO RESEMBLES A LITTLE BIRD.

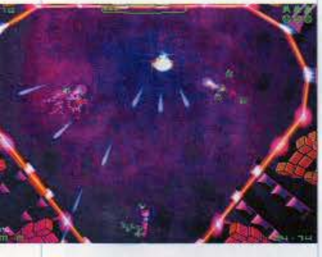
SPECTRUM AGAINS
* SMELLS LIKE BUR RUBBER (WHEN BUR
* HORACE GOES SK WAS DISAPPOINT
* NOT QUITE AS ABSORBENT AS
* RAIN BOW S IN THE CORN LOOKS A BIT

COMMODORE 64
* NOT AS EAS
* LOOKS LIK WRITER (AND LAD TYPE-WRI

VERDICT: UNDECIDED.

inbox


Issue 142



In your article on indie shmups (E141) you gave three of the games 'extra backslaps' for acknowledging the Mac. I would also like to thank the writer of that article for acknowledging the fact that they were acknowledging the Mac. With a gaming scene that is only just getting its hands on *KOTOR* it's easy (even for a Mac owner like myself) to forget that the Mac is a gaming platform at all. However, it is comforting to know that, should more companies start to release their games for both platforms in the same way that Blizzard and, to a lesser extent, Bungie does, Edge is ready to cover them.
Mark Raisbeck

We can't promise to cover many Mac games, but home-brew shooters that can be played on office machines will always find warm welcomes.

Although I'm sure you've been inundated with letters regarding age ratings on games, I'm completely exhausted by the complete ignorance I see on a daily basis. Allow me to explain. My work for a high street computer games specialist has recently had me questioning the ethics of gaming. I'm not talking about being paid to promote certain games or lie to customers (we aren't), I am talking about the ignorance that most parents show towards rated games.

While at work, I am confronted by the same situation at least three times a day. A child picks up an 18-rated game, and the parent brings it to the till. I inform the parent that the game is in no way suitable for the young child, and would expect the parent to listen and place the game back on the shelf. In the majority of cases the answer would simply be something along the lines of "Thank you but we will have it anyway," or the ever-more-annoying answer: "They've seen it all before."

The question I raise is: why? Why have these children seen it all before? *Grand Theft Auto* is filled with prostitution, violence, rape, drugs and bad language, yet parents seem to have exposed their children to these types of behaviours before. The complete ignorance of the parent is beyond belief. If that parent had taken this young child to see an 18-rated film at the local cinema, the child would be stopped from entering the cinema regardless of the view of the parent. In stores, however, we have no right to stop the parent from buying the game even if we know the game is for a young child. Recently, one of the best responses I received from a parent was: "Well, kids aren't really kids for long these days." And I suppose this fact would have nothing to do with parents exposing their children to such violent and adult materials at younger and younger ages. Ratings are made for a reason, and without trying to sound like a killjoy, they should be adhered to without exception. Although I don't believe that games like *Manhunt* actually promote the use of violence, constant exposure to such titles from a young age cannot help but harm the moral upbringing of children. There is no benefit in allowing a child to play age-restricted games.

It's about time the press, and the government, woke up and realised that the fault does not lie with the shops or the developers, but with ignorant parents

Stopping the production of these games would simply be surrendering to the negative public view of gaming. It's about time the press, and the government, woke up and realised that the fault does not lie with the shops or the developers/publishers, but rather in the hands of ignorant parents.
Ben Tipple

Clearly it has no control over parents abusing the system, but the BBFC will be sharing its views on game ratings in an **Edge** article next month.

There is a common misconception that hell is a place full of the worst things imaginable – bottomless pits, pools of lava and evil little red devils. But here's the thing: hell is actually a place full of familiar and loved things, only they are all somehow wrong and disturbing. While I won't go as far as calling it hell, if hell had a waiting room outside of it, mine would probably be Game Stars Live.

The whole event just wasn't planned very well. It is one thing to wait a long time for a scary ride in a theme park, and it is another thing altogether to queue up for a quick multiplayer game of *Halo 2*. I didn't bother queuing up for Bungie's game and after queuing up just to enter the Nintendo 'pier' I decided I don't want to queue up for *Metroid Prime 2* either, no matter how eager I am to try that game. Standing around staring at people's backs isn't my idea of a fun day out.

I didn't have to wait too long to get my hands on *Burnout 3*, but that game came out a week after the show, so what's the point?

On top of that we had a portable Game shop with exciting 'show offers' (which seemed a lot like their regular offers) and the ability to buy games that weren't yet released (as in 'preorder'). There were a lot of girls dressed as prostitutes (was that the theme this year or something?), taking their pictures with eight-year-olds, and adult-only areas with *Mortal Kombat*, *Fight Club* and drawings of naked cartoon girls saying 'Thanks for cumming'. And there were also tons and tons of really crappy games that are going to be just as crappy when they'll


GS Live drew crowds – and in certain areas more than others, laments Michael Bregman



be released over the next few months. And lots of samey military games about soldiers creeping through tall grass – *Medal Of Valour*, *Men Of Duty*, *Call Of Honour* and many more.

The show's logo has two guys playing videogames on a couch (leaning meaningfully and realistically), but don't let that fool you. Whether you were walking around, queuing or playing, you were on your legs pretty much most of the time.

On top of that, I can add personal encounters with a frustrated and rude cotton-candy girl at the Nintendo pier and a fat sweaty brute who snagged a freebie my young companion managed to catch fair and square. Soon enough the crowds and the pseudo-cool atmosphere just made me want to throw up. We originally planned to stay to the end, hoping that the lines would get better towards the end of the day, but by 4pm I just had to get out.

I went there with two friends who stayed at my place for the night. We played *Wario Ware* on the 'Cube and it was ten times more fun than anything we did in Game Stars. It made me wish I'd just stayed home with friends and played *Wario Ware*, *Halo* and several other gems. Without queues, without prostitutes and with plenty of seats.
Michael Bregman

The queues for *Halo 2* certainly were beyond a joke. Next year we'll see if we can arrange some sort of **Edge** Super Passes for readers to win.

I am upset because of a little company named Nintendo. They have given me so much pleasure over the years, providing me with an abundance of classic games to experience and enjoy. However, why do they feel they can re-release waves and waves of these old games to the public time and time again (see *Super Mario Brothers*, *Super Mario Brothers DX*, *Super Mario Brothers* NES classic, etc)? Yes, these games are incredible, but couldn't Nintendo please turn their attention to creating something fresh? Nintendo is like the battered and bruised boxer who's thrilling people with highlight reels of his knockouts from yesteryear without producing any significant performances of late.

I have a dream and I'd like to share it with you. My dream is that Nintendo will one day make a brand-new Mario game. But not just any Mario game – a side-scrolling Mario game in the style of the 2D classics we all love and cherish. A Mario game with all the playability and addictive qualities of the classics they keep rehashing backed up by the power of their latest system. Today's consoles have unbelievable amounts of power – why not use this power to fuel a new classic?
Frazer Hammill

There's something about the forthcoming *Super Mario DS* that doesn't look quite... *right*, but it could still turn out brightly. And don't ignore *Yoshi's Touch And Go* (see p81).

With an elderly gentleman who had suffered a stroke, I recommended buying Super Monkey Ball, as he did have some movement in his left arm

As a medical doctor and a long-term gamer I have been following with interest the media's knee-jerk reaction to the dreadful murder of a young teenager who stabbed his peer, allegedly over a videogame (although the game in question has since not been found to be responsible directly for the crime). The Daily Mail and its ilk, no matter what some gamers think, did actually have a few (if somewhat limited) points to make – for example, games with age restrictions should not be sold to young people less than the age stated.

However, the picture painted by the so-called 'informed' newspapers – that all videogames are essentially bad for development – does in fact have an opposite pole to the argument. As you may imagine, I regularly come into contact with a wide spectrum of diseases and problems, and on many an occasion I have recommended videogames. To give you just three examples, in the case of an anxious and agoraphobic lady who rarely went out and feared public transport I advised her to buy a GBA and a few games to take out with her on journeys; in the second case, with an elderly gentleman who had suffered a cerebro-vascular accident (stroke) and consequently developed weakness down his left side, I recommended buying a Gamecube and *Super Monkey Ball* as he did have some awkward movement in his left arm and hand; and finally, a young man who underwent spinal surgery with resultant long recovery time I advised to buy a PlayStation2 and a dance mat so when he was fit enough to walk he could use this to further speed up recovery, along with physio (and occupational therapy, which is unfortunately fairly infrequent). You may also be pleased to know this man was fairly intelligent and thus I told him about **Edge** – now he's considering a subscription after buying it religiously for the last few months!

In all these cases, and many more not mentioned here, videogames have had a positive impact on those unfortunate to be rendered with mobility problems or ill health.

I will definitely continue to recommend games in the future. Unfortunately, as yet the NHS doesn't have the funds (or probably, and more accurately, doesn't consider gaming to be of use in the medical setting) to add videogames and/or consoles to the prescription list. Given the relative low cost of gaming these days, it's a small price to pay when, along with so much enjoyment, games certainly help some people suffering ill health get better or improve their quality of living.
Dr Richard Evans

Good work, doc. But what would you prescribe for Nintendo Thumb?



I just wanted to talk about my experience at Game Stars Live. I approached the Future Publishing stand hoping to find out whether any of the Edge journalists were around, praying that maybe I could meet Motters himself, or perhaps the legend that is the Biffo, or maybe even whether I could finally find out the true identity of RedEye (and give him my own sideways look on the industry).

Instead I was greeted by a saleswoman for Future Publishing. She enquired if I read any of the magazines, to which I replied "Edge." She tried to get me to sign up to a subscription although they had no copies of Edge in stock. I said I'd think about it. Then I decided to ask my main query. "Any of the Edge journalists around?" I asked quickly. "No!" she exclaimed.

Now, this may not seem a very major issue but what the hell had made the woman so wound up that she exclaimed an answer to my very reasonable question? I moved on from that stand at speed.
Richard Bagley

As far as we can tell, this was approximately the 12,987th time such a question was asked at the event, and the lady in question was getting frustrated that people wanted to meet us and not buy her subscriptions. Which is no excuse at all, of course. So we'll just apologise on her behalf. Next year we'll try to sort it so that we get to spend some time at the Future stand (this year other commitments, including Game Developers Conference Europe, ECTS and EGN, prevented us doing so).

"Playboy's going to be covering videogames, from the perspective of an adult who has a life." This brilliant quote caught my eye. I can see how, thanks to innovatively designed female characters taking their clothes off, gaming has shrugged off its image of being played by spotty adolescent nerds pleasuring themselves to Lara Croft's

Continued

latest bra size. Adults with lives everywhere will, I'm sure, be ordering *Playboy: The Mansion* right now.

I fail to see how there is any sort of maturity in this Playboy 'article'. Was there honestly any seriousness to the idea? Let's take their very own game, for example – one of the games pioneering videogaming's maturity boost. OK. I'm a little stuck for ideas. Oh, wait, are they trying to put sex, and possibly other grown-up themes, into games? Intriguing. After all, films do it; why not games? Actually, it appears they are not. It seems it's a cash-in on *The Sims* with the USP options of 'Get out boobies' and 'Mash badly rendered faces together while wiggling bum'.

I'm not sure what annoys me the most: the fact that this is all making videogames look more immature and silly, or the fact that some idiot is claiming that because I play games without boobies I clearly have no life.
Sam Wilderspin

But would it make any difference if it was 'Mash *amazingly* rendered faces together while wiggling bum'? Actually, no, you're right, it's all just a tad sad.

I knew it would happen eventually, but seeing something from Fumito Ueda's art team on the cover of **Edge** magazine for the first time was just so special. Thank you.
Chris le Roux

We do it all for people like you, Chris.

I was watching Ghost In The Shell a few weeks ago. I don't know if you've seen it, but it's set in a future urban cityscape. Near the beginning of the film during one of the few action sequences, where they're chasing a guy with a machine gun, it came to me how brilliant the next instalment of the *Grand Theft Auto* series would be if it was based in some future setting. Think buildings, skyscrapers from Blade Runner and a few of those cool flying digital adverts in the film, and perhaps a few cars and vehicles à la Back To The Future 2 and Minority Report!

Could you imagine the potential freshness and excitement such a game could conjur up? Imagine the main character, if you will, perhaps with bionic cyborg enhancements, running down a sprawling cyber metropolis, stealing hovercars, flying cars, etc, via the aid of a jetpack, and working for rival multinational corporations rather than gangs, fighting for ultimate control of the city. I just thought it is a great idea, and, even if no one else does, could you pass my thoughts and comments on to Rockstar?

Also, why has no one resurrected some of the truly classic games of yesteryear? Recently the trend was started with *Ninja Gaiden*, and I can honestly say that that is the best Xbox game I have played to date. I read in a recent issue of **Edge** that they are reviving *Altered Beast* for PS2, yes?

Imagine how potentially good (and hopefully not disappointing) a 21st century version of *Streets Of Rage* or *Golden Axe* could be for the next-generation consoles.
Mark Taktak

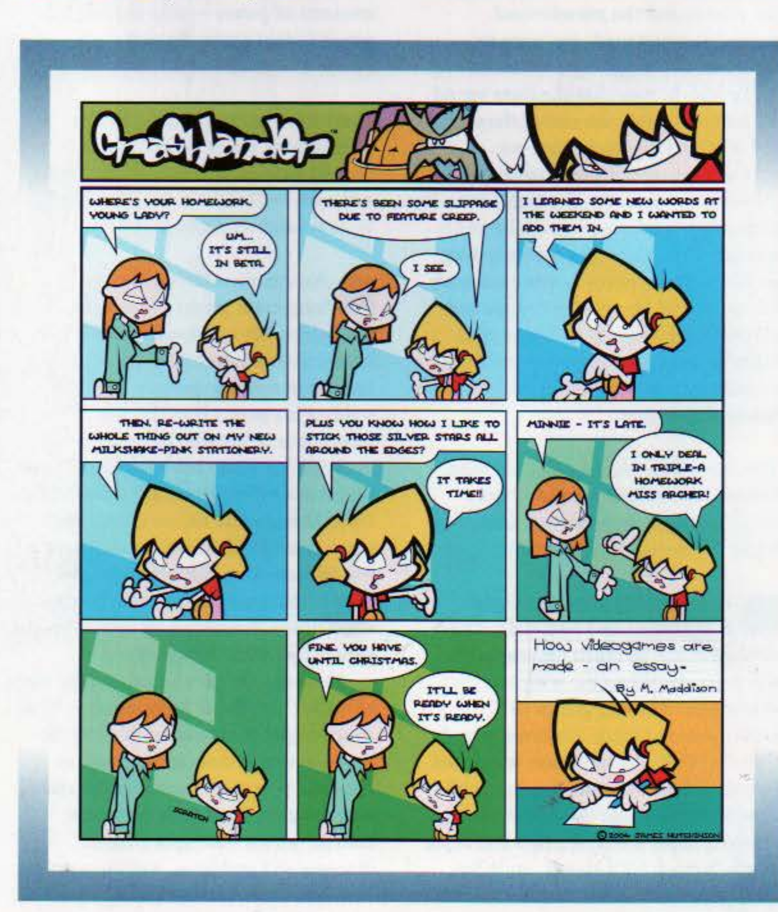
We're sure Rockstar will read your ideas right here, Mark, but there's more chance of the past being further plundered before the *GTA* series looks to the future.

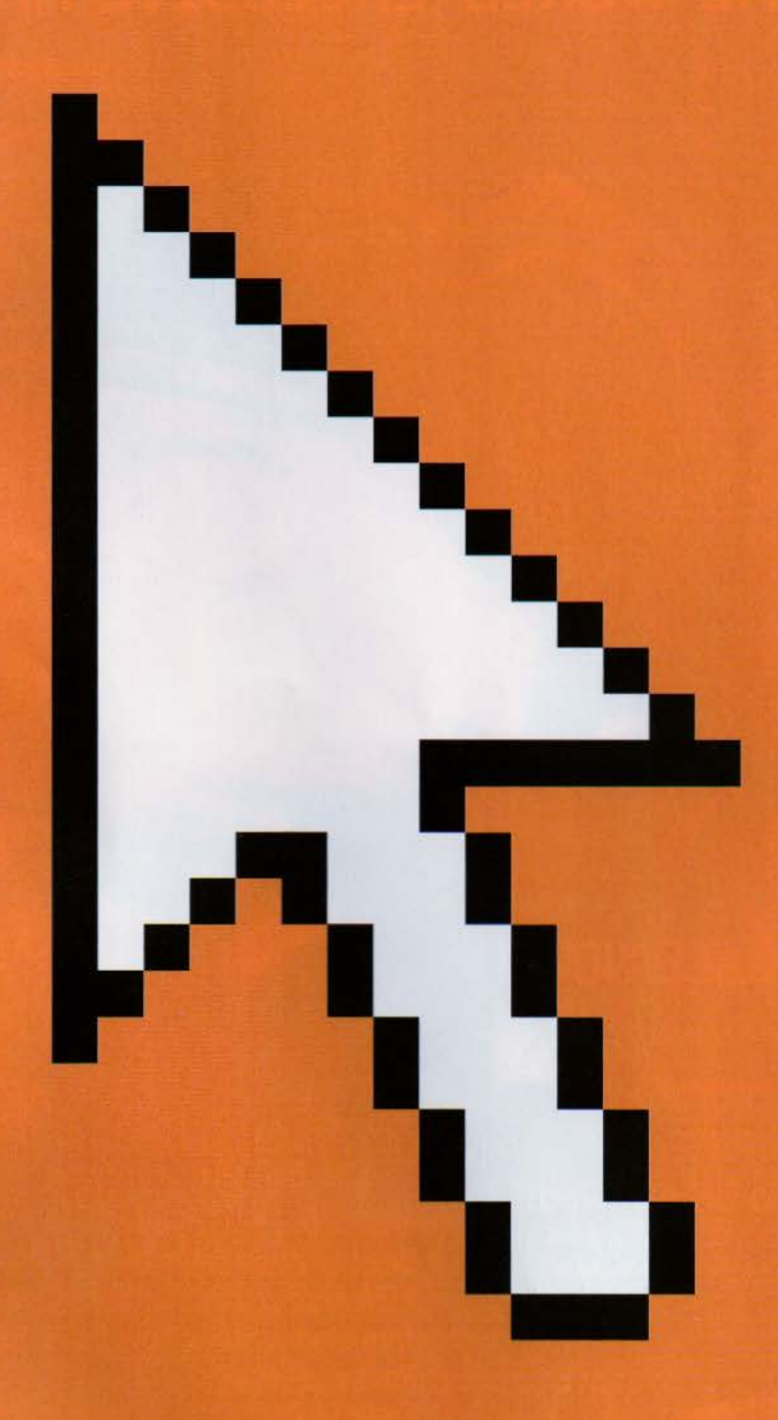

All about the boobies: *Playboy: The Mansion* won't be finding a home at Sam Wilderspin's

Whatever happened to the Edge forum? Has it been destroyed with the overhaul of the Edge website (which has a new look, admittedly, but now centres much more closely on putting a copy of the magazine into every passer-by's hands rather than containing worthwhile extras such as the links to programs and gaming oddities it used to)? The forum created such a community feeling with readers and there was a lot of worthwhile substance to it. It would be great to see it back, as well as the database containing all Edge review scores since its birth.
Russ Clarke

Right now, there are no plans to resurrect the Edge forum, but the website itself will be given an overhaul soon. Many of the Edge forum's former users now congregate at www.rllmukforum.com, so give that a try – but don't hold us responsible for any of its content. As for Edge review scores, have a look at library.northampton.ac.uk/njd/edge/index.php – it's a little out of date, but a cracking piece of work none the less.

Send us email (**edge@futurenet.co.uk**), but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW





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